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THE EDGE OF EMPIRE

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THE EDGE OF EMPIRE

BY

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“BEYOND THE SHADOW,” “THE DAWN,”

“CAVANAGH OF KULTAUN”

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THE EDGE OF EMPIRE

CHAPTER I

SPRING in Kashmir offers to weary humanity as true a spectacle of the Divine in Nature as can well be imagined or desired, and on this particular April morning no fairer spot could be found than the region immediately surrounding the bungalow leased by Lewis Clievedon of the Indian Political and shared vicariously by his two friends, Mayhew, a Captain of Engineers, and Gilbert Lavel of the Indian Medical.

The bungalow stood back from the Gulmarg Road, its garden a riot of colour and scent, its front windows facing across a wide grass slope sprinkled with fruit trees in blossom that dropped to the noisy river some hundred feet below ; while behind it the forest rose steeply like delicate green spray tossed in the air. Above the spring foliage came the darker green of pines growing in serried ranks along the rockier higher slopes, then even the pines ceased and the snow began, leagues of diamond-shining whiteness rising in unmeasured heights against a sky of dazzling blue.

The bungalow itself was rather more spacious than most, charmingly furnished and well-equipped ; Clievedon was a wealthy man, had friends in high places, and an exceedingly pretty young wife. Three things that might very well have disqualified him for making much out of life. As it happened he was fortunate enough to possess an amazing appetite for hard work, and had been sensible enough to acquire knowledge of mankind in general and the Indian Frontier in par-

ticular to enable him to gratify that appetite, in the way most fitted to advance the welfare of those for whom he laboured.

He had undoubtedly that elusive gift of charm, but he was singularly modest in respect to his popularity with men ; of women it suffices that at twenty-five he had fallen in love with and married Henriette de Vaudelet, and the marriage had apparently turned out a success.

This spring—the last before he went home on a year's leave—Henriette was not in Kashmir, having gone to England the previous summer, and the three friends were having a bachelor fortnight, occupying their days in sport, their evenings in lengthy discussions over well-loved pipes with dogs undisturbed on the chairs around.

On the last night of their leave, however, it chanced that an important personage took it into his head to visit Srinagar, and Clievedon therefore found himself summoned to dine at the big white house near the lake, whereupon all three friends cursed, and Mayhew and Lavel were left to entertain one another as best they could.

After the talk had run the gamut of the last ten days' shooting, the possibilities of the teams in the running for the Lahore Cup, the ever-green topic of official mistakes and slackness, and the futility of expecting the Home Government to realise the needs of the North-West Frontier, it narrowed down and became purely personal.

Mayhew, a friend of both Clievedon's and Lavel's families, long, lanky, fair-skinned and blue-eyed, broke a somewhat protracted silence by an abrupt remark :

“What on earth persuaded Henriette Clievedon to go back last year ? I thought this bungalow was taken chiefly for her.”

Lavel knocked his pipe out and nodded.

“So it was. I suppose she grew tired of it.”

Mayhew grunted non-committally, after a minute or two he spoke again.

"It always seems to me to be the one inconsistency in dear old Lewis's character. What in the name of the devil made him marry her, and what in the name of heaven makes him happy with her?" Lavel shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear fella', I know no more than you do. I quite admit it's amazing—the marriages of one's friends usually are—but for pity's sake don't ask me to explain the problem."

But Mayhew could not leave the matter.

"Lewis is no fool—he's got more brains than most. How the dickens does he put up with her? I don't pretend to understand women, don't want to, but even so I know that he might have married some one a good deal more suitable."

Again Lavel shrugged.

"And probably hated her. You're talking rot, R. O. T. Henriette Clievedon is very pretty, possesses fascination, knows how to dress. What more do you want, you old misogynist?"

"A heart!"

He was unprepared for the abruptness of Mayhew's reply, but before he could comment upon it the younger man went on speaking.

"A heart—that is what I should want in a woman. Not just a charming face and figure and air to tantalise. Good Lord, Lavel, should you want to marry for what you'd hardly notice in a month? But a brain big enough to risk love—a heart so warm and brave that it will chance a return—a nature so generous that it is above moods—that will just give and give and give—that's what is worth having in a woman! That's——"

"Bravo, Mayhew."

The interruption uttered in a half-laughing voice with something peculiarly arresting in its timbre, checked Mayhew in full flight; turning sharply he met the gaze of very

brilliant rather mocking grey eyes looking out from a strong bronzed face.

"Lewis! You!" he spoke sharply, "I thought you were at the Palace."

Clievedon closed the door and crossed the room, a man slightly above middle height and finely built, with a suggestion of a great reserve of strength about him, both mental and physical. The hard jaw, and chin very slightly cleft, the bold curve of the nose and mouth, no less than the fire beneath the steadiness of the eyes spoke of strong passions and an even stronger will, and though neither of the other two men was in the remotest way a weakling, yet it was easy to see that here was a dominating personality, and one that was essentially male.

He helped himself to a drink, dropped some ice into the tall glass, then glanced once more, half-amusedly, at Mayhew.

"Well?"

The monosyllable brought a smile to Mayhew's face.

"I refuse to rescind a syllable!" he said.

"Good!" Clievedon crossed over to a chair and lifted the glass. "Her health!" As he set the glass aside the khitmutgar entered with a note, handed it and stood waiting, an impassive white-clad figure. Clievedon read the brief message, frowned and looked up sharply.

"Who brought this?"

"A messenger from the Palace, sahib. He waits without."

Clievedon's frown deepened; he sat for a moment, his eyes on the paper he held, his thoughts obviously remote, then rose and went over to the little bureau that stood at the far end of the room.

"Excuse me a moment," he said, and the remoteness was in his voice, "I must send an answer now," and forthwith proceeded to scrawl a brief reply. When the khitmutgar had departed, Lavel spoke.

"Anything wrong, Lewis?"

"No. Merely annoying. The chief thought he should let me know that Umra Khan has left Kabul."

"Why the devil worry you about it, anyway," Lavel enquired. "Surely the chief doesn't expect you back at the Palace to-night?"

"If so he won't get me," Clievedon retorted, then coming back to his chair dropped into it with a yawn.

"Lord, I'm tired!"

"Never mind. You've leave in front of you, you lucky devil." Mayhew's voice was envious. "When do you go?"

"Next month. It will seem strange to see London again."

"Piccadilly and the newsboys shouting and the hansoms jingling along in the crowds after the theatres. . . . You brute!"

Clievedon looked at Lavel with a grin.

"Yes. Won't it be jolly?"

"A year's leave! What it is to be a success! Damn it all, why don't I get a year's leave?"

The grin deepened.

"Too valuable, dear old chap. India couldn't spare you. Chuck me the matches!"

Lavel threw the matches across, got up, stretched profoundly and gently kicked the sleeping fox terrier awake.

"I'm going to bed," he announced. "Get up, Tig!"

The fox terrier likewise rose and stretched, adding a loud yawn, then trotted off obediently at his master's heels and the other two were left alone.

There was silence for a little after he had left, then Mayhew spoke.

"What are your plans, roughly?"

"London—wish to heaven you were coming too, old fellow."

Mayhew thrust out his long legs, surveying them absently.

"Wish I were! By gad, what I'd give for a sight of

England in general and London in particular. Heigho—i only I were a millionaire.”

Clievedon looked at him narrowly for a moment, but his tone was casual enough.

“To soften the heart of your ideal?” he asked and though Mayhew did not move, his lanky figure stiffened.

“Yes,” he said, and with the brief answer the atmosphere of the room changed, and after a moment Clievedon got up. “I must turn in. You’ve got the devil of a journey back to Gilgit and I’ve got to get down to Simla as soon as maybe. Good night, old fellow.”

They separated, Mayhew to tumble asleep the instant he flung himself on his camp bed, Clievedon to lie awake for over an hour, his thoughts busy on this the eve of a year’s absence over his work on the Chitrál-Gilgit Frontier during the past twelve months. Young as he was, he had been sent to Chitrál on a mission a year previously to give the formal support of the British Government to Nizam-ul-Mulk the new Mehtar of Chitrál; and the work had been difficult in the extreme.

Chitrál occupying the unenviable position of a buffer state between Afghanistan and India had been placed by the father of the present ruler under the nominal suzerainty of Kashmir, for the old Mehtar, like all Chitrális, hated and feared the Afghans; and Kashmir is a tributary state of the Indian Empire.

Consequently when the old Mehtar of Chitrál died and the heir to the throne fled from the reach of his usurping brother to the shelter of the British raj, it became necessary for the British raj to take a hand in the matter. Hence the despatch of Clievedon with a mission that had been, after many perils and vicissitudes, safely accomplished; and its celebration by ten days’ shooting in Kashmir.

When Clievedon at last fell asleep the stars were paling and the first hint of dawn, pearl-hued and exquisite, was tinging the eastern sky.

CHAPTER II

THE Tilbury train ran into Liverpool Street half an hour late. The terminus was humming under its giant glass roof. The platform alongside the train was crowded with people eager to welcome travellers and porters awaiting the onrush of work, and it was not easy to see any one individual at first. Lewis scanned the crowd frowningly, then suddenly the frown disappeared and he threw up his hand in salute, for a child was waving frantically from amidst the throng of people.

Three minutes later a maid had been unceremoniously hustled out of the way by a very imperious thirteen-year-old, and Diane Clievedon was hanging to her father's arm pouring forth a torrent of excited chatter.

"Daddy, darling, how brown you are and how lovely you look! The carriage is here and mother said she hated station meetings and I am to bring you home at once. Do you think I've grown, Daddy?"

She barely gave him time to answer as she dragged him along, but at the carriage's side he checked her unceremoniously.

"Be quiet a minute, you little firework. I must see after the luggage," and she had perforce to obey till they were off. Then she leant against her father with a sigh of happiness.

"I am so glad!" she said. "There's a dinner party to-night, but will you promise to slip upstairs at half-past nine just for a teeny-weeny *second* to say good night to me?"

"A dinner party?" Lewis echoed her words with a

momentary frown ; he had hoped for a quiet evening alone with his wife. " Yes. Very well. I'll come, dear."

" Thank you. Mamma is terrifically excited at your being back. She has been out to heaps of places and she's going to a big ball next week as a Bacchante. It's all fancy dress for the poor little crippled children. Who was a Bacchante, Dad ? "

Lewis was well acquainted with his daughter's habit of conversational leap-frog and it did not disconcert him ; he enlightened her as far as he thought fit with regard to the Greek god's attendants, gathered that the ball was to be a huge fancy dress affair at Hampshire House and that his wife was one of the moving spirits on the committee, then relapsed into silence save for appropriate comments on Diane's chattering information.

The house in Sloane Street was reached at last, a pretty maid—Mrs. Clievedon hated any thing or person about her to be ugly—admitted them into a narrow entrance opening further back into a square lounge hall exquisitely decorated and furnished and Diane flew up the curving white stairs with a shriek of :

" He's here ! We've come ! "

Lewis turned to the maid.

" In the drawing-room, sir," the girl said, answering his unspoken question, and he followed Diane at a more decorous pace, the old feeling seizing him as he trod the soft velvet that he was in an exquisite doll's house, cramping despite its perfection to one used to wide spaces and great stretches of land and sky. The drawing-room door was open, and as he reached the top of the stairs his wife stood in the doorway.

" Lewis ! How delightful to see you again ! "

She held out her hand with a pretty gesture of welcome, and his blood fired at the sight of her and the contact of her cool fingers.

She returned his embrace, then, as he released her,

caught sight of Diane standing just inside the drawing-room watching with eager curious interest, and seeing her, twisted herself free from Clievedon's arms, swift anger in eyes and voice.

"Diane! What are you doing there? How dare you stand spying so? What do you mean by hiding and listening? How dare you?"

Her voice rose sharply, a ring in it that foretold danger; her eyes flashed, their pupils contracting almost to pin-points; swinging round on the child she caught her by the shoulder with slim fingers that had the grip of steel.

"I—I was not hiding—I—did not listen—I—it was——"

The child was stammering, her face pale as her mother's was flushed; confused and frightened as ever by the rapid changes of mood that composed Henriette's character.

It was just the same then, the tempests, the calms, the utter want of self-control and the unavailing remorse; in a flash Lewis realised that he had hoped against hope for a difference even in face of certain knowledge. Meeting the look the child flung at him he spoke curtly.

"Diane, go to the nursery now. I'll come soon. Henriette, I want you."

The authoritative quietness of his voice was in sharp contrast to Diane's shrill treble or Henriette's excited tones; frowning he laid his hand on his wife's arm and the child, twisting from her mother's momentarily loosened grip, fled upstairs leaving husband and wife alone. For a moment neither spoke, Lewis silent because of the unreasoning disappointment that had reawakened within him. Henriette, however, went into the narrow sunlit drawing-room, her swift anger evaporated for the present as though it had never been.

"Diane is too precocious," she remarked, her voice normal, her eyes once again unclouded. "It's being so much with me. Please don't spoil her, Lewis, she's troublesome enough already."

Then with a little gesture she dismissed Diane as a subject of conversation.

“Come and tell me about yourself,” she said, and her voice sank till it was a caress in itself. “I want so much to hear, Lewis, to listen, to know if my dreams of all you did were true.” She laid slim white fingers on his arm and leant the weight of her slender body against him as he stood, her face pale, her great dark eyes half closed.

For a moment his pulses throbbed heavily, and he held her close, then unbidden came the memory of the look he had seen in Diane’s eyes, and very gently his arms relaxed their hold.

“You shall hear everything,” he said. “But talk to me first yourself. Are you well? Is all right with you?”

During the brief silence that followed he thought she would break out once more into rage, but with one of her bewildering changes of mood, the smouldering fire died in sudden laughter.

“I have no news——” she cried. “But there are to be delightful things happening this season and you are going to do everything with me and take me everywhere.”

“This ball for instance?”

Her eyes danced like a child’s at his words.

“Yes, *mon ami*, this ball. I am going as a Bacchante, and you shall——”

“Not be Bacchus! It wouldn’t suit me. What are you going to wear?”

“A leopard-skin.”

“No more?”

“Vine leaves, sandals and my hair! Lewis, it is going to be a great affair this ball, every one is going.”

She talked excitedly, eloquent hands gesticulating, eyes as animated as her lips; a small dainty figure with dark hair and vivid delicate colouring.

“When is it to be?” he asked, watching her. “And who in the world am I to represent?”

“ On the twenty-sixth. We are to join Aunt Felicité’s party. She is going as Carmen.”

“ Good Lord ! ” Lewis’s voice rose sharply. “ Henriette, she can’t ! She really can’t ! Surely Richmond will stop it.”

Henriette laughed and spoke pityingly.

“ Dear Lewis, surely you do not think Uncle Henry would dare to object ? Why, he would acquiesce if she wanted to go as a nymph. Indeed, I rather wonder she did not ! She is dining here to-night, by the way, and I have promised that we go on afterwards to Mrs. Hillier’s dance.”

Lewis hesitated.

“ Is it quite—definite, your promise ? ” he asked, and Henriette nodded.

“ Quite ! They are so looking forward to seeing you.”

“ I thought perhaps we might have had this evening together at home,” he said. “ Wouldn’t you have preferred it ? ”

Henriette’s great dark eyes danced.

“ But of course, stupid ! Only it is so impossible ! Are you still as domestic as ever, Lewis ? ”

He passed by the jest and laid his hand over hers.

“ Why is it impossible to stay at home just for one evening ? ” he enquired. “ Surely Mrs. Hillier—or any one else—would understand that the circumstances are rather unusual. Besides—there is Diane.”

Henriette’s brows drew together sharply, and twisting herself back into a corner of the couch she faced him with face grown suddenly fretful.

“ Ah, Diane ! ” she said. “ That is why you wanted to be at home. You meant that Diane should be with us, not that we should be quite alone. I do not want Diane, I want you ! ”

Despite her unreasonableness, the last words made Lewis’s heart throb. He moved nearer, tightening his grip on her hand and putting his other arm round her.

“And I you!” he said. “That is why I do not want to go out to-night—not because of Diane. She can dine with us if you like, but it is afterwards . . . afterwards. . . .”

He broke off; passion made speech suddenly difficult, and Henriette’s lips were very near his own. Leaning back from his embrace she spoke hardly above her breath.

“Yes . . . leave Diane alone just now . . . we do not want Diane . . . kiss me, Lewis.”

Not till an hour and a half later, when he was making his way to the nursery in accordance with his promise to Diana, did Lewis realise that his request was ungranted, as all such requests were apt to be, brushed aside in Henriette’s method by an appeal that never failed.

Diane, curled up in the window-seat, was staring out over the roof of the opposite house to the tops of trees just visible, and received him with a mingling of eagerness and reproach.

“You said ‘soon’!” she exclaimed, pulling him down beside her. “And nurse has been bothering me to go out for ages. I go in the Park now till six and then I come in and have tea.”

Lewis twisted one of the strands of dusky hair round his finger.

“Suppose I take you in the Park instead of nurse?” he suggested, and was greeted with a shriek of joy.

“Daddy! Will you really? How angelic! But won’t mother want you?”

“No. She’s resting. I’ve only an hour or so, but that’s better than nothing, isn’t it? Run and get your things on and be quick.”

There was little need of the latter injunction and less than five minutes later Lewis closed the front door behind them, Diane walking demurely beside him despite the excitement that surged within her.

They entered the Park by Alexandra Gate and made

their way slowly towards the bandstand, Diane talking vigorously.

"Mademoiselle Laugecourt comes every morning and stays till after luncheon," she said, in answer to a query as to her day. "But it's the evenings that are so dull—and Sundays. This winter mother has been out of town such a lot and Sundays there is only nurse, and she's not very interesting to talk to—she's no ideas on *things*—things one thinks you know, dad. I ride every morning at eight with Harwood and I've music lessons on Tuesdays and Fridays in the afternoon, and I go to fencing on Mondays and Thursdays, but it's dreadfully dull *afterwards*. I wish I'd got a sister."

Lewis bowed to a passing acquaintance, found himself compelled to stop and chat with some friends of his wife's, whose carriage came to a standstill close by, and was unable to reply to his daughter's words till near the Achilles statue they selected chairs. Then he returned to the subject.

"It does not sound very exciting," he said, resolving that he would speak to his wife on the matter of Diane's complaint. "Nurse takes you out, then, in the Park and elsewhere?"

"Yes. And she tramps along till she's tired, and then flops down and reads, and expects me to sit still and stare at the children playing. Dad, I'm too old to do that! I want some one to talk to."

Lewis surveyed the flushed face with sympathetic eyes.

"You go out with your mother?" he suggested, wondering as to the answer, and Diane nodded.

"Sometimes. Of course that's gorgeous. Last week she took me calling with her twice, and once driving here after tea—and I'm to help at the Charity Bazaar at the Albert Hall on the twenty-eighth, and sell programmes at Aunt Felicite's *matinée* next Wednesday. It's only the *talking*! It's only when things come in my head and no one would understand."

He turned his chair a little so that he could look straight into her eyes, and putting out his hand laid it on hers.

“What sort of things, sweetheart?”

The light that leapt into her grey eyes at the caress startled him painfully.

“Oh—things I think about,” she said, her fingers gripping his. “Shapes of days and weather and——”

He interrupted her.

“Shapes of days, dear?” he said gently, “I don’t quite understand.”

“Why, a bright day with sunshine is all square and up high—and a grey day is *flat*—like that——” she made a swift gesture. “And the weather. Summer is always uphill to September, and then after Christmas the year is right down in a big hole and has to climb out.”

He nodded, and she went on rapidly.

“And daddy, what are wild oats? I know it means doing things people shouldn’t, but what sort of things, and why does mother think it’s so dreadful of Howard Allerton to have run away with that girl who dances at the music-halls? Mamma had her to dance for her and Howard met her then; but now he’s married her, everybody thinks it’s dreadful—and if they invited her they oughtn’t to mind him knowing her and falling in love, ought they?”

She poured out statement and question, and reaching the end of news and breath alike for a moment gazed at her father with eager enquiry, while Lewis, realising something of her perplexity, cursed the carelessness that had soiled the child’s ears with such gossip. Realising too that she was awaiting his answer, he spoke with some hesitation.

“Diane, dear—you see you’ve asked me such a lot of questions all at once. Who first talked about wild oats?”

Diane wrinkled her brows.

“Mamma and Victor. They laughed. And then one afternoon, when every one was talking about Howard, and they said it was all very well for Howard to have had an

affair with her—her name is Estelle Eden—but to have married her was simply suicide. What did they mean by an ‘ affair ’ exactly, daddy ? ”

Lewis felt swift anger rising within him, and for a moment he was silent ; Henriette’s guardianship had not sheltered her child. Diane, watching him, saw him frown.

“ Diane—when you are older, dear, a little older, I will explain to you,” he said, and felt how poor an answer it was: “ It would be rather difficult for me to tell you just yet, and will you promise me not to ask any one else these questions that you have been asking me ? ”

He dreaded lest she should demur, but he need not have feared.

“ Of course. I don’t want to talk at all to any one else,” she said. “ If you will tell me all those grown-up things later on it’ll do just as well. It’s only when mother says things in French to other people in front of me, or nurse says : ‘ Be careful ! The child’s there ! ’ that I want to understand. It’s so annoying, because I’m not a baby. Dad, what do you think it feels like to be dead ? ”

The question was asked so airily that Lewis could only stare ; whereupon his daughter laughed.

“ It will be such fun to be able to fly,” she remarked, and without waiting for any reply went on talking.

“ I ride Trinket, you know. And Harwood rides Blue-boy. Trinket dances about so and people stare. I like being stared at—sometimes.”

Another time Lewis would have crushed the incipient egotism with no uncertain hand ; now, however, something else claimed his attention.

“ You ride Trinket ? But how’s that ? Harwood is——”

Diane shrugged her shoulders in a curiously unchildlike manner.

“ I know. He was awfully worried about it. He told mother it was your orders, but she just said she knew best and that if he didn’t do as he was told he could go. You

see, Harwood is heavy and Trinket is rather small—she's not a weight-carrier anyway—and mother said that if he rode her at eight, she'd have lost her freshness, but I am so light that she's nearly as fresh as if she'd not been out when she wants her at ten."

"But——"

Lewis checked himself with an effort; this last action of Henriette's was really too much. To put a child—her own child—on a horse that needed the most skilful handling so that the horse in question might remain fresh for herself later, was a piece of selfishness which shocked him. Henriette herself was a magnificent horsewoman, quite capable of managing Trinket however badly that chestnut beauty might behave; but Diane, good rider as she was for her years, had neither the seat, the hands, nor the experience, to be mounted on such an animal and his orders on the matter had been stringent. Trinket was to be exercised early before her mistress should need her, and Blueboy, and Blueboy only, was to carry Diane.

The thought of the child's danger clutched at his heart, and Diane, quick to read any change in his face, leant impulsively towards him.

"I am quite safe, really!" she said. "Trinket is generally very good, and Harwood is careful. Don't stop me, will you, or mother will be dreadfully disappointed. She doesn't like Blueboy. Oh! Are we going?"

Lewis had risen as she spoke and now he held out his hand.

"Yes, dear. It is late already."

They walked back slowly, Diane's arm through her father's, and once in the house she clung to him with sudden ardour.

"Daddy, you will slip up at nine, won't you?"

"Directly dinner is over," he promised her. "It may be a little later—but don't stay awake. I will just wake you."

The promise quieted her fears and she went upstairs to

the nursery to curl herself up on the window-seat once more and eat her supper of fruit, milk and biscuits, weaving long stories in her mind as she watched the sunset over the park.

She was a lonely child, and the periods of alternate spoiling and neglect were the worst possible thing for her; dimly she felt the wrong and resented it, resented too being left still in charge of a nurse when other children were promoted to the schoolroom and a governess. Things would be different now though; some instinct told her that while her father was in the house life would be a good deal pleasanter, and when her frugal supper was finished, she did not at once snatch up a book as was her wont, but spent the time till her bedtime by gazing at the sky and weaving romances, of which she was the heroine rescuing her father from a hundred perils.

Meanwhile, before he went to dress, Lewis rang up the stables and gave a curt order anent the morning's ride, then made his way to his dressing-room. Henriette, in the hands of her maid, called a gay greeting which he answered briefly, and when his toilet was completed he knocked at the intervening door. Her voice bade him enter, and one glance told him she was alone. With a characteristic instinct for getting a disagreeable thing done at once, he went straight to the point.

"Henriette," he said so quietly that she was deceived. "At what hour are you riding to-morrow?"

She drew the broad jewelled fillet binding her hair a little tighter, stared for a moment into the glass, then answered almost absently. "Ten. Why?"

"I have given orders that Trinket is to be saddled for me to-morrow."

There was a second's pause, then Henriette wheeled round.

"For you? Trinket? Why? What am I to ride?"

"Blueboy."

She stared at him unbelievably.

“Blueboy?”

“Yes. Trinket will not be lively enough to suit your taste, and Blueboy can always be relied upon for a good ride.”

Still she did not understand, and Lewis’s mouth set a little.

“In future Harwood will carry out my orders, not yours,” he said. “Do you understand, Henriette?”

That she did was evident from the flush that dyed throat and cheek crimson. Blueboy, a bay of some seven years possessing perfect manners coupled to a somewhat lazy disposition, was not a favourite mount of hers.

She knew that tone in her husband’s voice very well, and for the moment was inclined to sulk; then curiosity overcame her.

“Those orders being——”

“Precisely what they were when I left. Harwood will ride Trinket and Diane Blueboy at eight. Later——”

But she cut him short with a gesture.

“I congratulate you upon your chivalry! I may risk a fall or my neck while Diane may not? I imagined a man’s first care was for his wife. I see I was mistaken!”

He drew a step nearer to her.

“That is ridiculous, Henriette, and absolutely untrue. I pay you the compliment of saying that you are perfectly capable of managing any horse. Diane is not. That you know as well as I do.”

His answer fanned her rising anger to flame, and as he approached she drew back against the crystal-topped dressing-chest.

“It is you who are ridiculous!” she said, speaking rapidly, as was her wont when passion claimed her. “Trinket’s manners are perfect and Diane is quite capable of managing her. I will not ride Blueboy, I tell you. I will not! As for Harwood riding Trinket at eight, it is unbearable, and I will not have it. Trinket will be completely worn out after fighting against him for an hour.

You know she won't stand thwarting when she is first out of the stables. But I might have remembered that nothing gives you more satisfaction than bullying me. I might have known you would take away all my pleasures and spoil all my plans when you came home. It is always the same! Diane, Diane, Diane, till I am tired to death of the child."

She paused with a sharp intake of the breath and stood facing him, cheeks scarlet, eyes aflame, fingers working nervously, clenching and unclenching; her own mention of Diane's name seemed to excite her still further.

"Diane is everything to you! Diane may not ride a dangerous horse, I may! Diane must be taken out in the Park while I am left alone in my room! Diane—I tell you you make me hate the sound of her name!"

She flung herself down on the couch in a storm of tears, and when Lewis endeavoured to touch her, lifted one little clenched hand and struck him on the shoulder.

"I hate you too when you come and upset my life! Go away—leave me."

Her contradictory methods had always been perplexing—the utter unreason of her attacks making it useless to attempt any form of self-defence or even explanation, and usually he ignored such scenes as these when over, as though they had never been. Sometimes certainly remorse seized her and her storms of sobbing in his arms distressed him deeply; to-night, however, social duties faced them both, and he could not follow the course experience had shown him to be the wiser, and leave her to recover herself. Instead, regardless of tears and anger, he bent down over her and took her twisting fingers in his.

"Henriette, Henriette! Listen to me, dear . . . there are your guests coming. They will be here in a moment or two. Henriette!"

She flung away from him, fresh reproaches^{on} on her lips. It was obvious that she was in no condition to listen to him,

and at last, when his aunt and uncle had already been announced, he realised she would not be in a fit state to come down, and ceased from trying to comfort her. When the worst of the attack was past and the stage of exhaustion had set in, resulting in white lips, drawn face, and closed eyes, he summoned her maid who was only too well accustomed to such scenes, and leaving Henriette in her skilful hands, went downstairs heavy-hearted and slow of foot.

The clock in the little white alcove pointed to fifteen minutes past the dinner-hour, and as he entered the drawing-room he had a vague impression of a sea of faces each and all frowningly reproachful; then the impression passed, and the crowd resolved itself into four persons, chatting quite good-temperedly despite untoward circumstances.

As he appeared, a figure rose hurriedly from a chair by the fire and hurried across the room holding out welcoming hands.

“Lewis, my dear boy, how are you? I am just delighted to see you again, delighted!”

She gave him no time to speak before enveloping him in a large and affectionate embrace, and when he was released, his uncle stood by, ready to utter congratulations upon his return. Felicité Richmond in her fifty-eighth year was a tall and naturally stout woman, full of overflowing energy and enterprise, kind-hearted to a degree, and possessed of a taste in dress that led her to the bizarre and at times even to the ridiculous.

“I like colour and comfort!” was her unvarying retort to the occasional remonstrances that her daughters or husband ventured to make, and to that defence there was no answer. Colour she certainly affected, the comfort was a matter for herself to decide; and beside her flamboyant personality, her husband appeared rather insignificant. A small pale man with a fair beard growing grey and blue eyes under heavy lids, as quiet as his wife was effusive, and

like her only in the genuine kindliness of his heart. There were two other guests, a young politician for whom a great future was predicted—James Ardingly—and an American girl, Coralie Grant, whom Lewis had met before.

When greetings were over, the inevitable question came from Lady Richmond.

“Where is Henriette?”

Despite himself, Lewis felt the hot colour rising slowly to his face. For all their frequency he had never grown reconciled to these scenes.

“Henriette sends you a thousand apologies,” he said. “She is most upset at not being able to come down, but she is not at all well and is going to bed. My wife is subject to severe attacks of neuralgia that absolutely prostrate her,” he explained, turning to Miss Grant. “And there is nothing for them but bed. She is so exceedingly sorry and disappointed to-night.”

Coralie Grant was eager in her expressions of sympathy; Lord Richmond vaguely suggested remedies of which he had heard; Ardingly murmured regrets and only Lady Richmond met Lewis’s eyes in complete understanding. As he took her into the long-delayed dinner she murmured a few words into his ear.

“She was so excited at the thought of your return that I expect it unnerved her a little. Don’t be worried over it, my dear. She needs rest and sleep, that’s all.”

Dinner over, Lewis ran upstairs to keep his promise to Diane, and on his way down met Henriette’s maid outside her mistress’s door. The girl put her finger to her lips.

“Madame sleeps!” she whispered dramatically. “She is much better now, m’sieur, but she is so wearied. I would not to go to her, m’sieur.”

He nodded in agreement, knowing her sound common-sense.

“Very well, Yvonne. If she should want me, ring,” and with that was obliged to be content.

CHAPTER III

HENRIETTE'S outburst was followed as usual by complete exhaustion, and when Lewis went to her room before going down to breakfast, he found her lying white and weary, looking forlorn and very frail.

She did not smile as he entered, but held out her hand to him with reproach in her eyes.

"You slept in your dressing-room. Why?" she questioned, "I woke in the early hours and found you were not here!"

He bent to kiss her and she wreathed her arms round his neck, dragging down his head till it rested on the pillows beside hers.

"Lewis—you're growing tired of me, I think," she said, and her voice shook, "I should be tired if I were you. You don't love me like you used—you can't! You can't! Lewis—Lewis, if you leave off loving me I shall kill myself!"

She was working herself into agitation, and he dreaded such self-reproaches as much as the thing that caused them; drawing her slight figure into his arms he sat down on the edge of the bed.

"My dear, you mustn't talk such arrant foolishness," he said very gently. "It's unfair to yourself and unkind to me. Don't you know that you hurt me when you talk like that? Dear—hush!"

She was sobbing now with growing abandonment and he held her closer; his own self-reproach making him all the more tender in word and act.

"Darling, hush! Henriette, don't go on like this."

“ You don’t love me as you used to ! You didn’t come last night——”

“ Yvonne said you were so exhausted—and those tiresome people went so late that I feared to disturb you.”

“ You never called my guests tiresome people before ! Lewis—why don’t you leave me if you’ve grown tired of me ? Why do you stay and pretend ? Lewis—Lewis ? ”

She pushed him away with fierce fingers, her eyes stormy through the tears that were already drying on the cheeks agitation was flushing so vividly. Very patiently he took the slim hands in his and spoke.

“ My dear one, aren’t all people tiresome when they keep me from you ? Isn’t it natural that I should want them to go that we might be together ? ” Then, sudden inspiration seizing him, his tone altered. “ I don’t think the want of love is on my side, Henriette,” he said, “ I think it is on yours ! ”

At his words she stared amazedly, then flung out her hands, passionate protest springing to her lips.

“ Ah, how cruel of you ! How utterly unjust ! I would die for you—you will kill me if you cease to care ! How dare you say so wicked a thing ? What do you mean ? ”

“ That you evidently want to go to the ball at Hampshire House without me.”

She was so astonished, that for the moment she gazed at him, uncomprehending, and quick to seize his chance, he enlightened her.

“ At the present moment, the sole item of my costume is a lace cravat left over from some other affair of the same kind,” he said. “ I do not believe it is an efficient costume. I was hoping you’d talk the matter over with me this morning and perhaps sketch some of your ideas for me.”

The words acted like magic. With shining eyes she flung herself back against his shoulder.

“ Lewis, how adorable of you ! Of course I shall be delighted ! It is going to be wonderful, and I am deter-

mined to be the most wonderful thing there. Ring for Yvonne, and tell her to bring my breakfast. Quick! Go down and get yours over too and all the tiresome newspaper reading. Breakfast, Yvonne, at once! Vite, mon enfant! Vite!"

She pushed him away, excitement in every tone and gesture; congratulating himself upon his idea he quitted the room and pulled the door to very softly behind him.

In the tiny alcove on the stairs he found Diane awaiting him, a slim figure in a green linen frock, just home and changed from her ride.

"Daddy!"

With a cry of joy she leapt out at him, and he held her close for a moment revelling in the touch of her cool cheek and the warmth of her greeting; then letting go her strangling hold on his neck she laughed.

"I rode Blueboy! He was funny at first, so like an elephant and so steady, but I'm not nearly so tired as I am after Trinket, and I think on the whole I like him. It's nice not to have your arm and shoulders ache afterwards. May I have breakfast with you?"

"Of course. Ah, good morning, Nurse. Miss Diane will breakfast with me while I am at home. Come, sweetheart."

The woman longed to grumble but dared not, and Diane, unseen by her father, made a hideous grimace at the retreating back, then followed demurely into the dining-room and sat down at the head of the table.

She poured coffee for him very prettily, wholly content with the importance of her post, while he read his letters and glanced through the paper, wholly oblivious to the fact that she was substituting kidney, bacon and eggs, anchovies, toast and jam, for her usual meal of porridge and fish.

When he had seen his letters and finally laid aside the paper, she was eating grape-fruit with languid care.

“What are you going to do to-day?” she enquired politely, ready to make conversation, now that further eating was almost a physical impossibility. “Shall you be able to take me out at all?”

He nodded, promising recklessly, watching her with his heart in his eyes.

Something in his regard seemed to touch her, for suddenly springing up she ran round to him and put her arms round his neck.

“Daddy, I simply must kiss you!”

She laid her cheek against his head for a moment, then spoke reflectively, straightening herself with some caution.

“I’d better not stoop though,” she said. “It’s rather uncomfortable. I’ve eaten a lot.”

Lewis gave a shout of laughter.

“You little pig! I’ve a good mind to smack you. Instead you shall go on a message for me and take a note to Victor. You said he was still in town, didn’t you?”

It would have been easier and quicker to telephone to Victor Lavel, who was in London; but Diane’s flush and the light in her eyes more than repaid him. Suddenly the child’s face clouded.

“Who’ll take me? Nurse’ll grumble and growl and take hours to get ready. Victor will have gone out before I get there. Oh, Daddy—can’t I go alone?”

He shook his head, gazing down at her with knitted brows, then with a quick:

“Wait there a minute!” he ran upstairs to his wife’s room.

She called assent to his knock and he entered to find her sitting by the fire, a charming vision in a silken boudoir-gown, and lace cap confining her curls, and a dainty breakfast-tray on a low table beside her. At his entrance she looked up in surprise.

“Lewis! You’re not waiting, surely? I shan’t be ready for an hour yet!”

"No, dear, I'm not. But I want to send Diane to Lavel. Who can drive with her?"

"Victor?" Henriette's echo was sharp. "Why? Why are you in such a hurry to see Victor?"

Lewis laid his hand over hers. "I've a rather natural anxiety to know how he is. Gilbert had a letter just before I left to say he had been seedy," he said.

Her frown faded at his words. "I forgot—yes—he had influenza rather badly," she said. "And send Yvonne to tell Frances to get ready. She's the under-housemaid and as good as gold. In an hour then, Lewis!"

He departed, carried out her order, and himself handed his daughter into a cab a few minutes later, then glad at the thought of the pleasure he had given the child, went indoors and entered his study.

Meanwhile Diane arrived at Arlington Street, found to her bitter chagrin that Victor Lavel was out; but hiding her disappointment under great dignity questioned his return. The manservant looked at her doubtfully, hesitated, then flung open a door. "He expects to be in at h'eleven, madam!" he said, with a dignity as profound as his questioner's. "Perhaps you would wish to wait?"

Disregarding her temporary henchwoman's gasp behind her, Diane bent her head regally.

"Certainly. Frances, go back home and tell your master that I am going to wait till M. Lavel returns."

For a moment Frances hesitated, but Diane's stern glance quelled her, and as the child entered she turned and went downstairs without protest.

In the quiet room Diane found a volume of "Don Juan" and picking it up began to read, wondering why her governess had once snatched it out of her hands, found it very dull, prowled round till she was rewarded by discovering a worn copy of Browning and plunging into the volume began on "Apt Vogler," and forgot everything else till the sound of a door opening roused her.

Lifting eyes still dreamy with the vision of a new world unfolding before her, she stared for a moment uncomprehendingly, then fully reawakened laid the book down and sprang to her feet.

“Victor! They told you I was waiting.”

Lavel stooped and kissed her, taking the note and laying it aside absently.

“Yes, they told me you were waiting,” he said after a moment. “So your father has returned? Is he well?”

“Quite! And so brown! Are you better, Victor?”

Lavel did not answer for a moment, he was distraught, even to the child's eyes, and his face always pale, looked ashen. A year Gilbert's junior, Victor Lavel, save for his black hair and pale skin, was very much his opposite, for he was just over six feet, exceptionally handsome, and very typically a Latin. Just now, however, his face was drawn and set, his black eyes had the look of a man who has not slept well for months, and there was a strained, bitter look about the mouth. It was obvious even to Diane that something was wrong; for they were sworn friends, and never before had he ignored her in such fashion. After a moment he spoke again.

“Did your mother send me any message?” he asked, his restless fingers drumming the edge of the table.

“No, I didn't see her. You haven't opened Daddy's note.”

“No.”

He picked up the envelope, slit it, and turning went over to the window. After a moment he spoke.

“Tell your father I will write.”

“Yes,” Diane got up. “Anything else?”

“No.”

“Nothing to mamma?”

His brows contracted sharply.

“No.”

It was certainly time to go. Flushing a little at the curtness of his manner the child went towards the door.

"Aren't you coming to see us, like you generally do?" she asked as he opened it. "Won't mamma expect you?"

For the third time he answered by a brief negative, and then something in Diane's face smote him, and he laid his hands on her shoulder.

"Dear . . . I'm a brute . . . but I'm not feeling very fit. Forgive me, sweetheart."

She flung her arms round his neck as he stooped.

"Oh, Victor, dear, I'm so dreadfully sorry! I'll go at once."

He kissed her, holding her for a moment closely in his arms, then with a :

"Don't worry . . . it's only a headache, you know," he took her down to the waiting cab and sent her home in charge of a hastily summoned commissionaire. When he had seen her off he went back into his sitting-room and there with fingers that trembled slightly ripped open the note. It was brief.

"DEAR VICTOR,—

"Gilbert told me just before I sailed that you were not very fit. What's wrong? I am so sorry. Dine with us to-morrow quietly.

"Yours ever,

"LEWIS CLIEVEDON."

"Yours ever?"

The commonplace ending struck him as a dreary joke, in view of what he had that morning learned from Sir Charles Rawlinson, the specialist. He tore the note to shreds, wrote a short answer explaining that he was going back to Paris immediately, and hoped as he wrote that no chance would throw him across Lewis's path for the next three days to prove the words a lie; then because his own company was not to be tolerated, went out once more on his way to his club.

CHAPTER IV

MEANWHILE Diane sat like a little statue as they drove back to Sloane Street, for she loved Victor next to Lewis, and his strange behaviour had upset her more than she realised. Home proved even more disturbing.

“ You come along of me at once, Miss Diane,” Nurse commanded wrathfully, “ or I know what it will be. You’ll be tired out and have one of your colds if you don’t rest now. Nice goings-on to be sure, and me worried half out of my life wondering what had become of you.”

“ You heard my father say I was going to see M. Lavel,” the child said wearily, climbing the stairs to the nursery and wondering why she felt so tired, “ so you couldn’t have been that.”

“ Oh, couldn’t I indeed ! That’s all you know about it then,” was the retort, accompanied by a rough pull at the sleeve of the coat. “ That was before ten that was, and now look at the time ! Quarter-past one ! And your dinner getting cold and everything.”

“ I don’t want any dinner,” Diane’s voice quivered, but she did not intend to cry.

Here was cause for fresh offence.

“ Not want your dinner ? There’s a nice thing to say. Isn’t it just what I told you ? Of all the tiresome children you are the worst——”

But such injustice was too much for Diane. Upset, strangely tired, every sensitive nerve a-stretch, she turned sharply on her accuser.

“ Then why do you stay ? I’m not a little child. I don’t need you. I should much prefer a governess, like other

girls of my age. Please leave me alone. I've not done anything I shouldn't. Oh, *do* leave me alone!"

Had the woman possessed any love for her charge she would have realised that shock, not impertinence, was responsible for the words, but being what she was she merely noted the occasion as a further proof of Diane's spoiled and evil disposition, and after the dinner had been played with locked her in the room that was still called the night-nursery, with a command to learn the Epistle and Gospel for the following Sunday.

The proceeding was no new one; Diane was used to punishments which seemed unreasonable, since they were the same now when she had passed her thirteenth birthday as they had been at her sixth, but since she could learn by heart rapidly and without much effort she had no particular objection to the form they took. This afternoon, however, matters were different; her head ached from suppressed excitement. She fretted at Victor's strange behaviour, and the confinement of the house on this lovely day seemed unbearable.

She was left in the intervals of Henriette's injudicious spoiling to the care of an ill-educated woman of no particular kindness or virtue, but only at times did her loneliness oppress her, and those times had invariably followed her father's visits home, after that never-to-be-forgotten summer spent in Kashmir. Latterly, as each leave ended she had suffered more, and now quite suddenly it came upon her that she could not face the thought of his return in a few months' time. She felt in a manner she had never felt before the truth of her assertion to the nurse that she was no longer a little child, and the realisation of the fact, immature though it was, made the very thought of the resuming of the old life after her father should have left, an intolerable thing to contemplate. Dropping the Prayer Book she leant her elbows on the ledge, and leaning her chin on her hands stared across the roofs and chimneys to

the radiant blue of the sky beyond, facing the future with despair in her heart—a despair too real to allow her to be conscious any longer of the injustice that kept her indoors on such a glorious afternoon.

When Lewis returned home about four o'clock, having left Henriette to pay some calls, he was told in answer to his enquiries that M. Lavel had not called or rung up, and that his daughter had just gone out with the nurse. It was a state of things that must not be allowed to continue. As the maid was closing the door he called her back.

“ You said ‘ just gone out,’ ” he said. “ Has Miss Diane spent the afternoon indoors, then ? ”

The girl looked confused. Nurse was a favourite below stairs, but she herself thought the woman's treatment of Diane a little unjust. Lewis saw the hesitation and spoke curtly.

“ Did you hear what I said, Annie ? ”

“ Yes, sir. I beg your pardon. Miss Diane was locked in her room all the afternoon.”

“ Locked in her——” Lewis checked the indignant words. “ Thank you. That is all.”

The girl gone, he went in search of Henriette. She was driving in the Park, Yvonne told him, and his anger by no means appeased he followed her, jumping on a 'bus that took him to Alexandra Gate.

The late afternoon was beautiful and not too cold, and as Lewis walked up the path beside the Row his anger waxed apace. To keep the child locked in her room on such a day ! “ Just gone out ”—it was positively inhuman to waste such glorious hours of rare sunshine ; steps must be taken to prevent a recurrence of such conduct, and if Henriette refused to take them, he 'must. Pausing a moment by Hyde Park Corner he saw his wife driving with an acquaintance, bowed, and went to the rails expecting the carriage to stop, but she merely flung him a brilliant smile as she drove by ; and turning on his heel he con-

tinued his search for Diane. He found her at last sitting on a chair watching the passing and repassing carriages with wistful eyes, and his heart was hot within him as he saw the look on her face.

Quickening his step he made his way to her side amply rewarded for his search by the light that flashed into her face and the colour that crimsoned her cheeks.

“Dad!”

The word rang out sharply, and she sprang to her feet, disregarding the instinctive movement of restraint the nurse made, caught his arm and clung to it.

“Daddy—where are you going? Can’t you stay?” Her voice shook, her fingers clenched in desperation on his arm, and he answered quickly.

“I’m not going anywhere, sweetheart, except to walk with you, if you’d like to come. Nurse, you need not wait. Come, Diane.”

She looked a different being from the child who had so forlornly watched the gay scene around only a minute or two ago, but he saw she was over-excited, and his manner grew correspondingly gentle.

“Shall we go to St. James’s Park for a change?” he suggested, as they turned towards Hyde Park Corner. “You must be tired of this place and a walk will do you good. You’ve had tea, I suppose?”

“No,” she said. “Please let’s go to St. James’s Park. It’s so pretty there, only Nurse will never walk so far.”

For the moment Lewis forgot himself so far as to say:

“Confound the woman!” much to his daughter’s delight, then thinking she still looked pale he hailed a hansom and put her in it.

“We’ll go and have some more tea first,” he said. “I’ve had none, and I’m sure you’ll keep me company, won’t you, sweetheart?”

With sudden fervour she clenched her fingers round his.

“Always—anywhere, Daddy!” she said, and there was

an unchildlike throb in her voice. Tea was a great success, and in the pride of giving it to her father, the unwonted joy of being positively ordered to eat the creamiest of creamy chocolate cake, Diane forgot for the time being a goodly part of her troubles. But when it was over and they were strolling by the waterside in St. James's Park her fears returned.

Seeing by the look on her face that all was not well, he slipped his hand through her arm.

"We'll sit down under the trees, shall we?" he suggested. "I think it's quite warm enough. This is the prettiest park in London, isn't it, Diane? And do you know that just up and down here is where King Charles II used to walk, feeding the ducks? The ancestors of these very ducks in front of us perhaps."

"Did he?" Lewis could see by the sudden expression in his daughter's eyes that she had acquired a more human interest in the Merry Monarch than heretofore, and being something of an historian and a staunch admirer of that brilliant and somewhat maligned king, he told her a few of the more reputable anecdotes that crowd about the memory of the Second Charles. Diane proved herself an eager listener, and when Lewis ended his impromptu history lesson it was time to go home.

At Buckingham Palace he hailed another cab, and they drove home both feeling pleasantly like truants, to arrive at the door almost at the same moment as the victoria.

Diane's look grew apprehensive, and her fingers tightened a trifle on her father's arm, but as luck would have it Henriette was in one of her most radiant moods.

"You pair of children," she cried in laughing salute. "You look so consciously innocent that I'm certain you have been up to some kind of mischief. What has he been making you do this time, Diane?"

Apprehension fled, and Diane smiled.

"Took me out to tea! I've eaten enough chocolate

cakes to be sick all night! But I shan't be! I feel absolutely well!"

Such frankness was disarming. Henriette flashed an amused look at her husband, and as they entered the house bent down and kissed her daughter's cheek.

"You look adorably pretty to-day, darling. If you like you shall have dinner with us. We're all alone. Tell Nurse to put on the frock that came home yesterday. I got it from Lucille," she added, turning to her husband. "I'm afraid it's overtrimmed and I want to decide. Don't be late, fairy-girl!"

In such a mood as this Henriette was irresistible, and though Lewis realised the unwisdom of allowing Diane to hear her own beauty praised, he could not find it in his heart to check his wife.

Instead, taking advantage of her humour, he spoke of his dissatisfaction with the nurse and suggested a change of régime; Diane was not in good hands—what did Henriette think of a governess? Some one capable and properly educated, but at the same time not too old.

He put the proposition a trifle anxiously, but to his great relief Henriette seemed to agree most cordially. She even suggested the change taking place without delay, seemed to have forgotten entirely the matter of Trinket in connection with her daughter, and for the remainder of the evening was her most charming self.

The next morning, among his letters, Lewis found one from M. Lavel, Gilbert's father, who resided in Paris, and after reading it went up to the room he had so recently left.

He found Henriette propped up with pillows, her pretty hands busily occupied with her letters that lay tossed about the lace coverlet.

At his unexpected entrance and the sight of his face, she slipped the note that she held under her pillow and sat motionless, gazing at him, her lips a little apart, her breath

coming a trifle unevenly. But that he was engrossed with the matter in hand he would have noticed the signs of agitation, as it was he came over and sat down on the side of the bed.

"Listen, dear," he said. "Here's a letter from M. Lavel asking us to visit him in November—why what is it?" For Henriette had laughed suddenly, a sharp, high laugh that had in it the note of relief, and he turned to her in perplexity.

She caught his hand, leaning against him with a sudden, childish gesture.

"Oh!—I was startled—nothing. How silly! Only—you looked so grave and stern I——"

He slipped an arm round her, gathering the slight ninon-clad figure close to his side.

"Little duffer!" he said. "Why you're trembling, dear. Do you mean to say you're frightened of me when I look grave?"

She laughed again, her fingers nervously teasing his.

"Of course not—it was stupid. Only I hate bad news, and I thought—go on, Lewis! What does M. Lavel say?"

He told her, pleased with the invitation to his old friend's house, for, despite the difference of the generation, René Lavel had a real comradeship with his son's close friend.

"Then of course we'll go," she said at last. "I love Paris."

"Lady Thurston is staying there, too," he said. At the last words she uttered a cry of joy.

"Grizel? Then write at once. Just Grizel for me and M. Louis and M. Lavel for you! Oh, it will be delightful! Write to-day and accept!"

He left her, humming a little French love-song, and wrote his acceptance and thanks to M. Lavel, while Henriette, tossing her letters in a heap, sat up and stared in front of her, arms clasped around her knees.

CHAPTER V

THE October afternoon was drawing to a close, and high above the flaming woods the quiet sky was showing faint gleams of blue through a dappled film of cloud. The atmosphere was so still that beneath the trees could be heard the rustle of the leaves falling one by one from the spreading branches above to the carpet of gold and russet below.

The predominant note of the landscape, of woods and gentle sky, was peace, the peace so wrongly named Death, which is really the birth of Life—yet there was cold in the world as the faint blue in the northern sky showed, and the tiny life of the animal kingdom had hidden itself till the approaching severity should pass.

For nearly half an hour Grizel Thurston had not stirred from the spot in which she had chosen to rest; she had had much to think about this afternoon and always the woods helped her. So in company with a black spaniel she had left the house soon after lunch, found a comfortable seat cushioned with dry leaves and surrounded by tangled roots that formed support for back and arms, and there stayed, even though her watch pointed to four o'clock.

A bridle-road cleaving the woods passed near her, but only once had any one intruded on her solitude; then it was only an old woodcutter she knew, in charge of an old white horse and lumbering timber-cart. He knew her, too, giving her greeting as he passed, and she had watched his blue blouse out of sight amidst the grey boles of the trees, giving the little moving group an interest as it were wholly detached.

It seemed to her that she had come to a halting-place in life, a dividing of the past from the future, and it was but fitting she should pause and give the tribute of thought to all that had been, as one gives tribute by the side of a grave. Behind her lay eight years of torment, none the less real because not of the kind that calls for public sympathy, and now ahead lay, as she hoped, peace and quiet just as that which lay in the physical world around her at this moment. Now at last, after the death of her husband, Humphrey, she was free to order her life as she wished, free to respect herself and live in health of mind as well as body, and her first act of freedom had been to sell the house in Scotland where she had been so wretched and return to the home of her childhood, the home enshrining memory and happiness and the high hopes of youth.

It had seemed as if the very sky altered when she first set foot on the soil of France after these long years, and a great weight seemed to be lifted from her soul.

Her mother had been English, but her father was French, and it was to Paris and that father's father that Grizel owed her training and her temperament; it was to her grandfather's house that she had returned this grey quiet autumn.

Nearly a month had passed since her return, and in that month her healing had begun. She loved her grandfather with a devotion few are capable of giving, and it was joy to her that her pleasure in his society was returned with interest. They had spent these past weeks in gracious companionship into which no one had intruded; after to-day, however, things were to be different, for M. Lavel was expecting guests for a few days' visit—a rare occurrence nowadays, when failing health and advancing age caused invitations to visit his charming little house in Paris to be few and far between.

It had been a cause for well-nigh world-wide regret when M. René Lavel retired from public life, his wonderful voice

still at the height of its beauty. But horror of the day when his hearers should be obliged to mingle regret with their praise, added to the necessity of another form of self-expression, drove M. Lavel from the operatic stage to his study, and now writing constantly and teaching a favoured few he intended to spend the remainder of his life.

The last year, however, he had failed perceptibly; he had given up his pupils, speaking quite frankly to Grizel of the matter.

"I need you when I have guests," he had said. "I find the strain of entertaining is becoming too much for me unaided. Spare me a few months regularly from your English home." And Grizel, gladdened by this need, agreed without demur.

M. Jean Lavel, her father, and M. Lavel's eldest son, had married an English wife who had borne him a family of seven, dying at the birth of Veronica, the younger girl, and leaving a blank in her husband's life that neither time nor fame could fill. Perhaps because of her, perhaps because of her nation's appreciation of his great art, M. Jean Lavel had always cherished a warm affection for his wife's country, had sent his sons to Winchester and given his daughters the freedom of an English education, finally settling in the country, near London, himself; yet Grizel, his eldest daughter, had always remained a Frenchwoman at heart, and her deepest love was given to the land of her birth.

Tall, fair, inclined to slenderness, Grizel Thurston at the age of twenty-eight was far more beautiful than she had been at eighteen, for her suffering had given her a depth of character seen at once in the curves of her mouth, the shadow of her steady eyes, a beauty as much of soul as body, irresistibly attractive.

As she sat in the grey roots of the old tree her thoughts presently left the past and went forward to the future. In England lay duties she could not neglect, the most import-

ant being her small son, and soon she must return. Gilbert, her beloved eldest brother, would be home, too, and he wished to spend most of his leave with her. Everything called her to settle her future plans. The spaniel's fidgeting roused her to the realisation that it was getting late and that Victor arrived at five and Mr. and Mrs. Clievedon shortly after—also that she had a long walk; so, rising, she shook the leaves from her dress, spoke to the eager dog and started on her return home.

But time had sped faster than she knew, and once beyond the Bois she was obliged to take a cab to the rue Solfèrino where M. Lavel lived in a small house standing very pleasantly with a view of the river.

She found her grandfather in his study, the room of all others she loved best in the house because it held more of his essential personality than any other, and as she entered he laid aside the book he had been reading and held out a hand in welcome.

"It is good to see you here," he said. "I have been dreaming since the light grew dim, dreaming of your little son."

Moving to his side, Grizel sat down on the big leather footstool he sometimes used.

"He is like you," she said. "It was what I prayed and longed for."

M. Lavel's beautiful hand touched her cheek caressingly.

"To think the old bon-papa means yet so much to one!" he mocked.

"To us all!" Grizel said, and taking the hand laid her lips upon it. "To us all! The veritable centre and pivot of our lives. If you are much to your world—as all Europe has known—how much more to us, when you are ours?"

"You should have given your heart elsewhere—the time is not too late. But I confess your extravagance pleases me. I fear I grow old and vain. Am I vain, Grizel?"

"No!"

“ But old, alas ! ”

She bent her head lower.

“ I would keep age from you with my very life if I could ! ” she said low, and was silent.

M. Lavel said nothing ; by and by he withdrew his hand and laid it for an instant on her hair. Later still he spoke.

“ He should be here in a few moments. It is long since you have seen Victor ? ”

“ Five years. He has changed ? ”

“ Greatly. I confess I understand Victor least of my grandchildren. The critics have treated him hardly, and he has suffered. It is the English training that he shows little—*hein*, Grizel ? ”

She laughed, rising and kissing his forehead, yet she guessed all was not as she would have wished it with the brother who was in all respects a stranger to her. He had entered the lists of art and, though too clever to be ignored, had met with a storm of abuse from the critics and established rival factions in the public. His plays were produced, his brilliance admitted, but no one of those who sought to court or flatter him knew what he felt, or if the violent admiration and equally violent enmity of his world touched him at all. Grizel felt herself anxious for the meeting.

The early October dusk was falling when the carriage was heard and she gave her grandfather a few minutes alone with his grandson before descending to the study. When she entered a little later she found her brother alone and went forward swiftly.

“ Victor, dear ! Five years since I have seen you ! ”

Victor kissed her, with a courteous formality.

“ I thought it even longer,” he said. “ You look well, Grizel ! ”

“ And I am quite afraid of so brilliant a brother,” she retorted. “ But are you always so pale ? You work too hard.”

He shrugged his shoulders, and M. Lavel entering she

turned to him. "Shall we have tea, grandfather?" she enquired, her hand on the bell, and M. Lavel signed acquiescence; afternoon tea was an English habit of his.

There was much to talk of. M. Lavel had not seen Victor for several months; and Victor also desired to hear all his sister's news. Presently, however, M. Lavel spoke of other matters.

"Did you know we had guests, Victor?" he enquired. "Clivedon comes to-night for two or three days. You will be pleased. He brings Henriette with him, for Grizel's sake."

As it happened Grizel chanced to glance at that instant at her brother, and despite the uncertain firelight the look she saw in his face startled her to dismay. Some instinct warned her not to remark upon his deathly pallor or the look in his eyes, but when he rose a few minutes later and quitted the room, she was not surprised.

Presently, making an excuse to her grandfather, she went in search of him, and finding the downstairs room empty knocked at the door of the bedroom he occupied when he chose to sleep at his grandfather's house, and, in answer to his brief word, entered.

He was standing by the window as she had seen him before, and only one candle was lit, barely illuminating the small, rather bare chamber; moving quickly across she laid her hand on his arm and spoke.

"There is something wrong, Victor. What is it? Can I not help?"

He did not repulse her as she feared, did not even deny her statement, instead he merely looked at her.

"Nobody can help," he said very quietly, "and do not ask me what it is. I cannot tell you. I suppose I am tired, or I should not have betrayed myself even to you."

"If you put it like that I cannot do otherwise," she said, and stood for a moment without speaking. When she spoke again her voice was low and very gentle.

“If ever the need comes to speak to some human soul, remember I have suffered too much myself to judge or ignore. You will remember that, Victor?”

He looked at her a moment with eyes profoundly desolate. “Yes,” he said, “and I am not myself. Forgive me. . . . You must go. Our guests will be arriving.”

She quite realised that it was time to go downstairs, but for the moment she could not face any one. Victor’s looks had unnerved her, and she sought her own room.

Once there, where the hickory and apple prunings on the hearth shot forth dancing flames, surrounded by the very chintz-hung furniture of her childhood, she realised the barrier of separation the past years had built between her own life and the lives of those she loved.

The sound of wheels without halting in the quiet street warned her that she must go down, and despite her anxiety she felt a thrill of pleasure at the thought of meeting Henriette, for whom she had cherished a lifelong affection. Oddly enough she had never yet seen Henriette’s husband; any visits that had been exchanged having taken place when Clievedon was away, yet he was Gilbert’s chief friend, and she had heard much of him for years.

It was with a certain curiosity, therefore, that she went downstairs, to arrive in the study just as the guests were being welcomed by M. Lavel, and at sight of her a little figure wrapped in furs broke away from the group and flung itself into her arms with a cry of excitement.

“Grizel! Grizel! Oh, how delightful to see you at last! You darling—kiss me!”

This was certainly Henriette unchanged, and after the kiss had been given Grizel held her off a moment to look at the slim childlike figure, the laughing, vivid face and brilliant eyes.

“You are prettier than ever,” she said, and Henriette laughed and swung round, catching hold of her husband’s arm as he spoke to his host.

“ Lewis ! D’you hear what Grizel says ? Come and be introduced to her at last ! This is Lewis, Grizel ! ”

With a laughing apology to M. Lavel, Lewis turned, and Grizel met the glance of a pair of brilliant, very keen grey eyes, still somewhat amused in expression.

“ How do you do, Lady Thurston ? It certainly is ‘ at last ’ isn’t it ? ”

Before Grizel could reply Henriette broke in tempestuously :

“ Lewis ! I can’t have you call her that ! You must just be Grizel and Lewis to one another ! ”

“ Won’t you let me shake hands first ? ” Grizel enquired, “ you were always impatient ! ”

They both laughed and Grizel felt her hand taken in a cool firm grip.

“ She hasn’t altered ! ” Lewis said, referring to his wife, with a little shrug. “ And I am more than pleased that we have met at last. ”

M. Lavel here suggested that they should enter the salon ; but Grizel, glancing at her watch, reminded him of the hour, and it ended by her taking them upstairs upon Henriette’s saying she wanted an hour to dress.

As they were quitting the room, however, the sound of a latchkey made them turn, and Louis, M. Lavel’s only other son, who lived with him and was a nerve specialist of some note, entered in time to hear Henriette’s words.

At them he laughed.

“ You won’t be an hour though, ” he remarked, laying his hand on Clievedon’s shoulder, “ so come down to the study and have a smoke directly you are ready. ”

Lewis nodded as he halted on the threshold of his room.

“ I will, old fellow. I beg your pardon, Lady Thurston ! ” for Grizel having escaped from Henriette was leaving the room as he tried to enter it. “ I’m very clumsy, I fear. ”

“ We were both merely in a hurry, ” Grizel replied, and

smiled ; for she knew she was going to like Henriette's husband.

As the door closed behind him, Lewis spoke to his wife.

" I congratulate you on your friend. Does that please you ? "

" Immensely ! " Henriette looked up from the corner of the couch into which she had sunk, with a little nod of satisfaction. " I thought you would ! She's a dear ! Charming, clever and good all through. It isn't often I praise my sex, is it ? "

He laughed, bending over to kiss the top of her dark little head.

" No, you little firework. Lady Thurston has my gracious approval. I've no doubt it will make a vast difference to her ! "

" Don't laugh at me ! " Henriette retorted, sticking out a petulant lip, " Grizel really is a darling . . . just like her father and M. Lavel. "

Lewis, however, having retreated to the dressing-room was saved the necessity of an answer, and very soon the arrival of Henriette's maid, Yvonne, put an end to the conversation.

Meanwhile in the room adjoining, which happened to be Grizel's, another and rather similar conversation was progressing, for Louis had entered with a message for his niece and stood warming his hands by the fire.

" I must go, " he remarked, without moving, for about the third time. " But I have not had a minute with you yet. How d'you think you'll like Clievedon ? "

" I like him, " she said. " He is quite worthy of Gilbert I do believe. "

They both laughed ; her extravagant partisanship for this, her eldest, brother being no new thing.

" I'll tell him ! " M. Louis teased. " It'll make a great impression I've no doubt. "

" Uncle Louis ! If you dare ! But I do all the same. "

It's the face of a man who'll do big things . . . it's strong and honourable and rather bold. I like the way he carries his head, that little touch of unconscious defiance. He ought to have lived in the days of chivalry. I think he'd have been rather a splendid knight."

"He's certainly a strong man," Louis agreed, "I don't think he fears anything on earth. He's a good leader and he's an awkward man to tackle. I'm glad you think so well of him, Grizel."

"I do. And now you really must go because I must begin to dress in earnest."

She thought over many things while she dressed, but ever and anon her thoughts returned to the man she had just met. His eleven years' close friendship with her brother had always puzzled her a little, because she had not pictured the man of Henriette's choice correctly. It was just because he was himself and not the choice she had imagined, that the puzzle changed ground as it were. She had not given Henriette credit for much wisdom—yet she had married Lewis Clievedon. Obviously she must revise certain opinions.

At dinner she sat next Lewis and studied his profile when he was talking elsewhere. Seen thus, the strength of the jaw and chin was noticeable, also the delicacy of the nostril and the close, well-set ear. Grizel liked studying faces, and this one she found of exceptional interest. Presently, turning with some abruptness, he met her eyes.

"Do you approve?" he questioned half under his breath.

Grizel felt the hot colour crimson her face; to any other man she would have shown no sign of embarrassment, but the knowledge of her own thoughts was her undoing. Even as she hesitated, his teeth gleamed as he smiled, mischief in eyes and voice.

"I guessed I should be judged!" he said. "You forget Gilbert has talked much of you, and although he is the

least conceited man on earth I have gathered a little what your feeling is for him. Was it unlikely you would review me for yourself ? ”

“ You make me feel I have been impertinent,” she said, the lovely flush still in her cheek ; for a moment embarrassment held her, then unable to resist the amusement in his face, she laughed.

“ Yet you guessed the truth ! ” she confessed. “ At least, in a measure. I did want to form my own judgment, whereas to other men I should pay no such heed. You have been rather closely knit with my kindred, you see . . . and you have compelled me to tell you the truth. I think you compel most people that way.”

He laughed a little, crumbled his bread for a moment, then suddenly turned back to her.

“ What is your judgment ? ” he asked. She met his look steadily.

“ It is a little early for it to be formed,” she said, “ but I think I am satisfied.”

He smiled again then, but the teasing light had gone from his eyes, and for a moment their glances held.

“ I am glad,” he said simply and turned away to answer some question of M. Lavel’s.

During the evening Grizel noticed more than once Victor’s silence, but not knowing what his customary manner was she thought little of it. To connect his agitation of a few hours ago with the Clievedons’ arrival was a thing of which she did not dream.

The conversation was fairly general during the short evening ; when M. Lavel made his excuses shortly after ten, Henriette announced her intention of following his example.

“ I’m so tired ! ” she remarked. “ It’s been such a journey ! Grizel, will you forgive me if I go ? ”

“ Of course ! ” Grizel rose hastily, “ I’ll take you to your room.”

As good nights were being said, however, Louis caught his niece's arm.

"You're not tired," he said. "You'll come down again, won't you? It's really quite early yet."

She glanced at the other two.

"Don't you want a talk all to yourselves? No? Then I will, just for a little." And with that Louis was content.

In the pleasant guest room allotted to the Clievedons, where the stove diffused a delightful warmth, Grizel turned to her friend with a little laugh of pleasure.

"Oh, it is good to have you in my own home!" she said, "and what a child you look! Just the same. You are about as slender as you were at fourteen and you are more exquisite to look at than ever."

"Oh!" Henriette caught her hands, "you are my own dear, are you not? You love me just the same, don't you, Grizel? If I were not the same Henriette, if I were quite wicked, you would still love me? Yes?"

Looking into the great dark eyes that were suddenly misted over with emotion, Grizel felt the old love and tenderness that she had lavished through childhood and youth on her friend, rising once more. Henriette looked so frail and young, so like a lovely child, and the odd husky little break in her voice went to Grizel's heart. She laid her hand over the clinging fingers.

"Yes, dear," she said, "always."

And the very quietness of her voice seemed to carry conviction to Henriette.

"That—is good to hear," she said, "because I am *not* the same—really I am not. I—I am very wicked and sometimes I am dreadfully frightened."

"Frightened, dear?" Grizel said, feeling many years older than the slim figure beside her, "But why? What frightens you?"

"I don't know!"

A child's hesitating answer. Grizel smiled.

"You've got your husband now, Henriette. He can take care of you."

"Lewis?" Henriette flashed one quick look at her friend, then let her black lashes droop once more. She twisted her fingers together and seemed to answer almost against her will.

"It is—Lewis—who frightens me a little, as well," she said rather breathlessly, and for a moment silence fell; Grizel could not discuss Lewis with his wife. Instead she spoke very gently.

"Poor darling. Well, when you are frightened next time you must just send for me and I'll come. I'll always come, dear."

"I will—it is, oh, such a relief to have you! And now I mustn't let you stay because they want you downstairs, which I think is most sensible of them. Good night—oh it is good to have you near me again!"

CHAPTER VI

WHEN Grizel re-entered the study she found chairs drawn nearer to the fire, one left for herself near the big winged chair her grandfather always used, the further lamp turned out and cigarettes and glasses on a little table foreshadowing a long evening's talk.

As she came in Lewis was speaking, evidently answering some former question of Louis's.

"Oh, I fancy Sher Afzul will leave Kabul and fight it out. It's been a strain to keep Nizam up to anything and his getting blind in public has upset the nobles. If Sher Afzul comes into the country with a biggish following we shall have trouble. Confound these buffer states. They're the devil for trouble, and I always considered that Umra Khan has been too much the spoiled child of frontier policy generally."

"Your pardon——" M. Lavel's voice held a note of perplexity, "you speak of this man—pst! His name is impossible—coming to make trouble. Who then is this other, this Umra Khan?"

Clievedon turned to his host. "I must ask you to forgive me. I am apt to forget to explain. Umra Khan is the ruler of a neighbouring state called Jandol. It's only a secondary place, and he got rather swelled head a short while ago. So he was dropped a trifle then, and over some debatable land rather fell between the devil and the deep sea as represented by His Highness the Amir of Afghanistan and the Indian Government. He's rather a fine fellow, only naturally we don't want him complicating matters. I think we've not heard the last of him yet. That's where I hate Nizam's weakness."

Louis smoking lazily and with an expression of great content, interrupted.

"It's very puzzling," he remarked, "there seem to be any amount of people knocking about, and apparently they are all dangerous. How in Heaven's name do you keep 'em clear in your mind?"

"I suppose it is puzzling. I'm not good at explaining, but you wanted to be put up to date with my affairs."

"Naturally . . . and suppose you try to give us a sketch of the whole thing. You were in charge of a deputation to Chitrál. Good. Why was it necessary for England to interfere at all? What has she got to do with the place?"

Lewis glanced apologetically first at Grizel, then at his host.

"I shall weary you talking about my own work," he said, "please don't ask me, Louis."

M. Lavel's courteous protest and Louis's "Don't be an ass!" gave him their answers, Grizel's smile hers. Leaning a little forward he picked a twisted bit of apple-wood from the hearth and began to draw maps in the air.

"Chitrál is here—Kashmir to the right, over there. Afghanistan to the left—*there*. Now the Chitrális are an Aryan people and hate and dread the Afghans, and in 1878 Aman-ul-Mulk, the old Mehtar of Chitrál, being afraid of aggression by the Amir of Afghanistan, placed his country under the nominal suzerainty of the Maharajah of Kashmir, Kashmir being, as you know, one of the tributary states of the Indian Empire. Also it is necessary that Chitrál being where it is, geographically, should be friendly to us. Have I made myself clear on Louis's first question?"

"Quite," Grizel said in answer to his glance.

"But admirably," came from M. Lavel.

"Then here is the political situation as I know it. Aman-ul-Mulk, the late ruler, was a fine old statesman to his finger-tips. When he died two and a half years ago,

he left two sons who were both eligible for Mehtarship. Nizam, the present beauty, and his elder brother, Afzul. Afzul was on the spot and seized the throne and Nizam fled to us at Gilgit, for if you are near enough the throne to be a menace, you're safer out of the way. Afzul had reigned two months when his father's brother, Sher Afzul, who was a refugee from Chitrál, appeared with an army before the capital, and Afzul, rushing out of his house to see what was happening, was shot dead. So Sher Afzul assumed the throne. Personally I think we were all glad to see him there because whatever his faults he is capable and brave; but Nizam was under our care, and of course he'd got to be thought about, and when he said he wanted to have a try for his rightful place we had to let him go. Sher Afzul hadn't enough support to hold his own when Nizam appeared, so off he went to Kabul and the Amir, leaving us committed to Nizam; and a precious bad bargain he is, too! Even according to Chitráli ideas he's impossible. When Afzul was alive he had requested that a British officer might be sent to reside permanently in Chitrál, but before any arrangements could be made he was killed, as I've just told you. When Nizam came to the throne and then came back to Mastuj he didn't feel very secure, for he asked that the resident political officer might have his headquarters shifted from Mastuj to Chitrál.

"It was settled that I should go—just two years ago this month, so I was ordered up, with two other officers and an escort—fifty—of the 15th Sikhs. We had good luck, things shaped well. Then I returned to India. A few months later the Government of India decided that it was inexpedient to have an Assistant British Agent permanently at Chitrál, so the others were ordered to Mastuj where they occupied the fort prior to being relieved. There's the state of affairs as briefly as I can give it to you."

"Are there any other potential Mehtars kicking round?"

Louis enquired, watching the blue smoke curling upwards. "It seems a trifle unsafe to be of the blood royal."

"Oh, old Aman-ul-Mulk had dozens of children—over sixty—but there are very few of importance, by his wives. There is only Amir-ul-Mulk, Nizam's half-brother and a little boy Shuja-ul-Mulk, who are legitimate, and they are the children of his Pathan wife. Amir is half-witted, or wholly an idiot, and Shuja is a child. There's no trouble in that direction—at least I think not. It's the others we're worrying about, Sher Afzul and Umra Khan. That's where the trouble will come. Have I made the position clear, monsieur?"

He glanced at the old man who answered at once.

"But perfectly. Your pardon that we trouble you so much."

"It is a pleasure to talk of one's work," Lewis replied, smiling a little, as he realised how very unusual such an opportunity was, "one is apt to become a trifle wearisome."

"*Ennuyant*? Never! You do not do yourself justice."

"It seems strange to us home people to hear you speak so familiarly of places so remote," Grizel said, after a minute or two. "How I should like to see that country!"

"You'd like to travel?"

"Yes. Especially more in the East. I have been in Egypt and once to India for two months. I'd love to go again."

"I've been trying to persuade Henriette to come back," he said. "But she doesn't like the frontier. She was with me in Kashmir when Diane was eight, you know."

"Henriette loves civilisation in its most advanced forms," M. Lavel said gently.

"She'd like the hot weather in the Hills," Louis suggested. "Shall we send her out with Grizel this winter?"

Lewis glanced up, meeting Grizel's amused eyes.

"That would be ideal," he said. "Only we should need you, too, old fellow."

"I have done too much wandering," Grizel interposed. "I need quiet here in France for a while. Besides—there is my little son. . . ."

"Shall you be in the Hills then, next summer?" Victor had taken so slight a part in the evening's conversation that his question was even a trifle startling. Lewis shrugged his shoulders at it.

"Heaven knows! Perhaps!"

"Does Henriette agree with your suggestion that she should come out again on the chance of being with you?"

There was some surprise on every face at the tone of the question, only Lewis seeming not to notice it.

"It's hardly even a suggestion," he said. "Only an idea. I should like to show her something more of the country."

"She's not strong enough for your strenuous life, is she?"

Again the half-veiled sneer; Grizel looked across at Victor's pale face with a queer little thrill of anxiety.

"Oh, you don't have to sleep on the bare ground or eat with your fingers where I'd take her," Lewis retorted pleasantly. "Why don't you come out, Victor? There's the sheerest inspiration—beauty untouched."

"Have a scrap with your old Sher Afzul and take Victor as war correspondent!" Louis suggested, laughing, "he'd write the country up."

"I'm not a journalist," Victor answered shortly, and refused to talk any further.

His attitude perplexed Grizel sorely; it was evident that on his side, at least, there was no love lost between himself and Henriette's husband and the situation seemed an unhappy one. Opening her window just before she got into bed, Grizel paused to look out into the quiet night and, as she did so, apprehension crept into her mind. She beat

the thought back with some anger at her disloyalty, but it had existed and she knew in her heart of hearts that it would refuse to be wholly stifled. Pushing aside the curtain she leant out drawing her dressing-gown closely about her, for the air though still was cold.

It was a perfect autumn night and almost starless, with the faint bite of coming frost in the air and no moon. Beyond the scanty circles of lamplight the scene was wrapped in shadow, only in one of the houses to the left two windows showed yellow panels of light. It was late enough for the adjoining streets to be deserted and only now and then was the silence broken by the sound of a passing cab, the horse's hoofs audible for a long distance in the stillness. Despite the chill air she remained a while at the window; it seemed in some way that her nerves were jangled and the darkness soothed them. Pleased as she was to meet Henriette again, the quiet weeks of her grandfather's rare companionship had been too precious for her not to regret their cessation. Then, too, with Victor an element of unrest had invaded the house.

The striking of her little travelling clock roused her from thought, and she went to bed smiling at her perplexities—were they not chiefly imaginary after all?

When the next morning Grizel descended to the small living room, for she could not break herself of the English habit of breakfasting downstairs, she found Louis awaiting her, and rather to her surprise Lewis Clievedon.

"I was told breakfast was ready for you two," he said, as he shook hands, "so I ventured to come down also."

"Like me, then, you prefer to have it downstairs," Grizel said, as Margot the maid brought in the fragrant coffee, "I hate my bedroom except to sleep in. How is Henriette?"

"Sleepy, but already planning the hundred and one things she wants to do," he said, smiling. "I fancy she intends to buy up Paris. She says she hasn't any clothes."

"That has been Henriette's cry since her schooldays," Grizel laughed as she seated herself at the table. "Well, I am at her disposal."

"You are coming to the clinique, are you not, Lewis?" Louis said, turning to Clievedon. "I've some interesting things to show you."

"This morning: I'll join Henriette and Lady Thurston this afternoon if I may."

He glanced at Grizel, who nodded smilingly.

"Of course! Has Henriette told you she wants to go to the Marigny?"

"Good heavens!" Louis exclaimed. "D'you know the show that is on there? She can't."

"I shouldn't advise it," Grizel remarked, a demure little smile curling her lips, "Louis can show you the posters this morning, Mr. Clievedon, and you can decide if you will escort us there. It's going to be a glorious day," she added, "these mists always lift. But it's much colder. There was quite a severe frost last night."

The desultory conversation continued a little longer. Then Louis rose.

"If you don't mind starting so early, we'll go," he said, and in a minute or two they were off, turning southward to the Boulevard and walking quickly through the crisp air.

CHAPTER VII

GRIZEL found her grandfather a trifle weary after his unusually late hours, but eager to continue the work that last night's entertaining had temporarily postponed, and having chatted with him for half an hour or so she went in search of Henriette, whom she found in the hands of her maid and full of excited interest in life.

She flew to give Grizel a tempestuous embrace, and then stood a moment by the window to look where the clear, pale blue of the November sky was dawning through the dissolving mist.

"It's going to be gorgeous! I'm dying to get out. Yvonne! Hurry, for pity's sake. Grizel, can you give me just every moment of to-day?"

Grizel nodded.

"Yes, your husband suggests we join him after luncheon. Shall we lunch by ourselves somewhere?"

"We will, and we'll drive to the Bois and get the seats for to-night. You will come to the Marigny, won't you? Why do you hesitate?"

"Wait till you've seen the posters," was Grizel's retort. "I don't believe you'll care about 'La Vierge Outragée.'"

"Grizel!" Henriette pounced like a furious kitten. "How *can* you!"

"That's just it. I don't think I can," Grizel answered. "That is the title of the piece, anyway, so don't blame me, my dear. And now be quick or we shall have such a short morning."

The title had certainly served to suppress Henriette's desire for sensation for the time being, and she did not

refer to the Marigny Theatre again till, as they passed a street corner, Grizel touched her arm, glancing significantly at a small red-and-yellow sketch of a pair of slim kicking legs topped by a skirt of minute dimensions. There was no more "to" it, as the expressive Americanism has it, and the owner of the legs, who was evidently being carried somewhere against her will, did not appear in the picture.

Henriette lifted dark brows, shrugged, then laughed.

"Oh, you are right!" she said. "Quite right! 'La Vierge' is not for me. Oh, Grizel, what an adorable day."

They were crossing the Place Carrousel, and just by Gambetta's statue, so amazingly alive and vital, Henriette stopped abruptly.

"It is so beautiful," she said, "so clear and cold and bright. Even the best days in England lack this exhilaration. Look at the winter blue above the Louvre! And the gold of those few leaves. It's the beauty—the history—the romance of France. And somehow, oddly enough, Paris never makes me feel wicked, even though it excites me. It makes me want to be good."

The carelessness had faded from her face and something in the tone of the last three words made Grizel glance at her more closely.

"Don't sound so hopeless, *petite*," she said. "If all consciences were as light as yours Paris would be the heaven I sometimes think it."

"Oh!" Henriette wheeled on her suddenly, eyes dark, face pale. "You don't know, Grizel! You don't know! Sometimes—sometimes I wish you did!"

The passion in the voice startled her companion, but this was neither time nor place for such matters. She laid a hand on the slim little velvet-covered one behind her.

"Dear, I am always ready to help you. Don't forget that. But let us go on now, because it is too cold to stand, and we have to meet Mr. Clievedon at three, you know."

"You go back to England soon, don't you?" Henriette

enquired. "Victor tells me so. What are you doing to-morrow?"

"I am going to call at the Convent of St. Clotilde to make enquiries for a friend about her little daughter," she said, whereat Henriette uttered a little cry.

"Our own dear Sainte Clotilde! Oh, it was lovely in those days, wasn't it? I wish they were back again."

"Without your husband, or Diane?"

Henriette nodded.

"Yes! I could wait. I . . . I—oh, why did you mention it? Let's talk about something else. And I want to go to Perrin's and get some gloves first—and Révillon's. Lewis is giving me some new furs. Talk about cheerful things, not past ones!"

Grizel did her best through the busy two hours that followed, and indeed it was not difficult, for Henriette threw off her unsettled mood directly she entered the shops, and flitted from one enchanting spot to the other like a butterfly.

"We'll go to the Opéra. It's 'Otello,'" she announced suddenly, as they passed the stately building. "I've a frock that will look adorable on those stairs, and I like 'Otello.' It excites and frightens me. An enchanting combination, Grizel, enchanting. How many seats shall I take? Or a *loge*? Louis? No, I suppose he will be at his clinique, or some horrible hospital or other. Victor?"

She paused at the top of the steps, head on one side, eyes restlessly glancing from Grizel's face to the busy traffic, then uttered an exclamation and darted forward. Victor was just coming out of the house.

In the frosty morning sunshine it struck Grizel that he was very pale and looked worn, but now as Henriette stood talking eagerly to him the slight haggardness of face became less apparent. When he came up to his sister two or three minutes later he was smiling, and Henriette appeared radiant.

“He is actually coming!” she said. “I have torn him from his terrible writing. And he will lunch with us, will you not, Victor? An engagement? Pst! Let it go. I want to hear of your new play. You *are* writing a new one, are you not?”

He gave way, telephoning his regrets to the friend he was deserting, and the three lunched at Paillard’s, and Grizel almost persuaded herself that last night’s happening was a dream, so gay was Victor, so very much his most brilliant self.

He excused himself just before three, and after putting them into a cab, went off to his *appartement* in the rue de Ponthieu, and they drove through the brilliant air to meet Lewis at the corner by the Admiralty buildings.

He was there already, Grizel seeing him before Henriette, who seemed lost in a pleasant little reverie of her own, and he was deep in conversation with a very broad-shouldered Englishman whose immaculate clothes were of the latest cut and whose appearance suggested Savile Row. The sight of him was so unexpected that Grizel uttered a little sound of surprise, thereby recalling Henriette’s wandering attention.

“What is it? What has——” she was beginning, but her question remained unanswered, for as the cab pulled up both men turned, the tall Englishman revealing a bronzed, handsome face with close-clipped moustache and the unmistakable stamp of the East about him.

At sight of Grizel he started forward, lifting his hat to show hair almost totally grey, eyes and lips alike smiling.

“Lady Thurston! You! Here! Good Lord, how extraordinary! I didn’t dream of meeting you here, even when Lewis said he was staying with friends. Lewis, you blighter, why didn’t you tell me I was to meet Lady Thurston?”

“My dear man, why should I know you wanted to? You had never mentioned her to me. Lady Thurston is my

hostess. Henriette, may I introduce Colonel Sir Henry Dysart? Dysart, my wife."

Sir Henry bent forward to speak to Henriette, Lewis glanced at Grizel.

"I had no idea you two knew each other. Dysart is one of my oldest friends."

"And one of mine!" Grizel retorted. "We've not met for some months. . . . I might have thought that you two would know each other, considering that he is in military command at Peshawar, only I've not had much time to consider anything yet, since yesterday. Henriette has whirled me off my mental feet!"

He made a laughing reply just as Dysart included Grizel by a little movement in his answer to a question of Henriette's.

"No, I am only staying here a day or two, then I'm going on to some friends at Biarritz for a fortnight before I join my boat at Marseilles. I ran into your husband by the Madeleine ten minutes ago."

"When did you arrive?" Grizel asked presently. "Why hadn't you written me?"

He drew back to her side as they stood all together.

"I didn't expect to be here at all, but a scapegrace young nephew of mine at the Beaux Arts got himself into a bit of a mess, so I thought I'd better stop and disentangle him before going South. And, as a mere detail, Lady Thurston, you hadn't given me your address. I was just on my way to a telephone office to look up M. Lavel's."

"Here's the carriage," Henriette interposed as the carriage Lewis had hired for his wife came to a standstill beside them. "You'll come with us, of course, Sir Henry, as you've found Grizel without having to hunt further. Oh! Hot-water cans! How nice!"

She snuggled down amid the furs, Grizel beside her. Sir Henry accepting, got in and Lewis paused a moment before following suit.

“Didn’t you say you had to go to the Gare St. Lazare after tea about some luggage that is missing? Then shall we go to the Bois or out for a longer run? Which would you prefer?”

“It mustn’t be longer than the Bois for me,” Grizel said regretfully. “I must go home before going to the Gare St. Lazare. If you intend going further drop me at the end of an hour and I’ll cab home.”

The reply was a signal for Henriette to stamp and Lewis to give the order and get in while his wife’s indignation found further vent in words.

“As if we would! Lewis, did you ever hear anything so idiotic! Sir Henry, isn’t she incorrigible? We were at school here in Paris together, Grizel and I, and she was just the same then. Always wanting to give up to other people and take the tiresome things herself. Such an aggravating habit!”

“Was she?” Dysart’s keen eyes narrowed a little with much gazing through tropical sunlight, glanced at Grizel, a glance that spoke volumes to his friend, but he did not speak and Henriette chattered on.

“She’d never met my husband. Wasn’t it odd? But we are staying with M. Lavel now. How long have you known her?”

“Five years,” the elder man said quietly, and Grizel, giving Henriette a protesting pat, suggested a change in the conversation and spoke to Lewis.

“When did you leave Uncle Louis?”

“Just after lunch; I had a most interesting morning. He’s wonderful. I wish I could get him out to the Frontier. What’s this of the Opéra to-night? Henriette just mentioned it to me.”

“‘Otello.’ You will join us, won’t you? Victor took a box. I believe.”

“Yes—if we might ask Dysart to join the party. But there won’t be room if Victor comes. I’d better get stalls.”

"What's that?" Attracted by the mention of his name Dysart looked round, and Lewis repeated his remark, it being supplemented by Grizel's quiet:

"Join us if you can."

"I'm afraid I can't," he said, "I've promised to dine at eight with this young wretch who brought me here. Look here, why not come to supper with me afterwards? Please do! Mrs. Clievedon, add your persuasions to mine—Lady Thurston looks dubious."

"I was thinking of my grandfather," Grizel said, hesitatingly; "I've left him to-day so much."

"Louis will be in all this evening," Lewis assured her. "He has a brochure to write and intends to be at home."

"Oh, is he working there? Then I will come with great pleasure. Sir Henry, you must be introduced to him. When will you call?"

"May I come back with you after this?" Dysart enquired. "I am very anxious to make M. Lavel's acquaintance."

She assented, and the conversation veered off to more general topics as the carriage glided swiftly along the Avenue Bois de Boulogne. Presently, the two men being for the moment immersed in a political matter and Henriette's attention being all for the gay human world around, Grizel found leisure to appreciate the glory of the winter afternoon from the unaccustomed comfort of a luxurious carriage—a luxury neither she nor M. Lavel could afford.

The sun, already nearing its setting, was gilding the trees to orange and scarlet, and the sky, in the east a frosty blue, was tinged with gold in the west. The lake, a sheet of pale azure, mirrored the crimson and flame of the trees all the more sharply because of the absolute stillness in the air which was growing keener as the day advanced.

Carriages sped along the broad roads at varying speeds, pedestrians in furs and the short smart skirts of the day walked briskly along the paths, and children, muffled in

warm coats, their faces aglow with the cold and exercise, ran and played in and out of the trees, their bright clothes making them look like darting birds. After the long penance of those eight years Grizel felt excitement rising within her at the life and movement around, at the crisp clear beauty of the day and the pleasant company in which she found herself.

The past with its dreary days and petty unceasing tyrannies was over, from henceforth she was free to order her life as she chose. Love surrounded her instead of criticism, the atmosphere of life had changed and a little warm glow of happiness crept to her heart as she glanced at Sir Henry Dysart. His friendship, so steady and loyal, had been her chief stay during those last miserable years, and it was good to see him again.

He was talking to Henriette, but as if in answer to her thought, he raised his head and their eyes met; instinctively she smiled, and the man's eyes lit up with a look unmistakable to see. It brought the colour into Grizel's face, and she turned her head away, gazing along the wide stretch of tree-bordered road ahead.

She had guessed for the past year that Dysart was in love with her; now she was sure, and leaning back in her corner she tried to realise whether she was glad or sorry. He was very dear to her, that she knew without a moment's indecision, but whether on her side the friendship would ever deepen into something greater was unknown to her.

So it came about that she was a little remote from the things around her this wintry afternoon, a little detached in manner, and the one member of the party who observed the detachment was Lewis. He had heard of Grizel Thurston for years, and more than once been curious to see the woman who exerted such a rare influence over his wife; Henriette's enthusiasm for her friend was so unbounded that he had often wondered what sort of a temperament could attract her so powerfully. Now he was satisfied, his

chief feeling was one of surprise, and he realised he had not given Henriette credit for such penetration.

Now, after that one glance, Dysart had resumed his conversation with Henriette, and Lewis watched Grizel with more interest than he knew. To him there was something essentially satisfying about her face, a sense perhaps of reliability and reserve of strength, a something that appealed to him even more than her beauty, and he could picture in the deep blue depths of her eyes a wealth of tenderness few women could command. Quite irrelevant, so it seemed to him, was the thought of Diane, yet it came, mingling inextricably with his musings upon the character of the woman opposite to him. He knew without question that Grizel would understand his little daughter, and the idea of asking her to take temporary charge of the child during Henriette's late winter sojourn on the Riviera, came into his mind. Only a day or two before Henriette had discussed the matter, agreeing with him for once in the undesirability of taking the child to smart hotels for weeks on end. Now the solution presented itself, if Lady Thurston would consent. He determined to talk to his wife about the possibility of the idea without delay.

The carriage had left the Bois before he had reached this decision, and threading its way along the narrow length of the rue de Passy, took the short cut through the Trocadéro Gardens to the Place de l'Alma and along the Cours la Reine; then quite suddenly he became aware that Grizel was leaning forward laughing, and Henriette, wearing an expression of utter bewilderment. His violent start seemed to amuse them all, and he apologised hastily. Henriette waved a hand.

"It isn't me. It's Grizel! She's asked you three times if you'll give her her bag. It's slipped on the floor and she can't get it."

"It was too bad to disturb you," Grizel said laughing, as she took the recovered bag, "I wouldn't have done so, but

I wanted my handkerchief. Here we are. Henriette, are you going on *chez* Madame de Choset or are you coming in now ?”

Henriette, disentangling herself from the rugs, gave a little shiver.

“ Oh, I’ll come in. It’s too cold, and it’s getting dusk. But what a gorgeous day. Lewis ! My muff !”

Inside the house Grizel turned to Dysart.

“ You’ll come to the study, will you not, and meet my grandfather ?” she suggested, and he followed her at once.

They found M. Lavel resting in his big chair and talking to the one visitor who was at all times admitted, the priest from a neighbouring church, who was an old friend and likewise his confessor. The Père Duchesne, white-haired like M. Lavel, rose from his seat as they entered, to welcome Grizel, who had been a favourite of his since her earliest childhood, bowed to Dysart and proceeded to take his leave—a gentle old man, with the forehead of an intellectual giant and the eyes of a saint. As he left M. Lavel turned to his guest.

“ I have heard much of you,” he said extending his beautiful hand. “ You have been a good friend to my granddaughter. I thank you.”

Sir Henry took the fingers, that had written such magic for the world, in his, bending his great height over them.

“ I am honoured by Lady Thurston’s friendship,” he said gently. “ It has been a desire of mine for very long to meet her grandfather.”

M. Lavel signed to a chair close by.

“ Will you not stay a little ?” he said. “ Grizel fears to ask you lest I should be too tired to act capably as host, but I have rested this afternoon.”

Dysart sat down, charmed as all were by the old man’s exquisite courtesy, and when a few minutes later they were talking with obvious pleasure in one another’s society,

Grizel excused herself and departed to give the other guests their tea.

Three-quarters of an hour later when Grizel re-entered the study to bid Dysart good-bye, he asked permission to accompany her to the Gare St. Lazare.

"I'm going to walk," she said; "I love walking these frosty nights. If that doesn't alarm you I shall be very pleased to have a companion."

"I should like it above all things," he said, and they set off together walking briskly through the cold night air.

The river, reflecting every point of light with that brilliance that frost alone seems able to produce, was a miniature replica of the sparkling sky above it, and Grizel felt anew the exhilaration of spirit to which she had been so long a stranger, seizing upon her. She was so engrossed in her own sense of physical and mental well-being that she did not notice her companion's silence till they had crossed the Place de la Concorde, then, as they paused to cross by the Madeleine, he took her arm.

"It is an awkward corner," he said as if in excuse, and just because such an excuse was unnecessary and unlike him, Grizel's caution awoke.

"Did we settle where we were to meet to-night?" she asked. "I have a vague idea we did not complete arrangements."

"Your idea is correct," he said. "Shall it be Voisin's? Or will that be too quiet? I fancy Mrs. Clievedon might find it so. Perhaps the Café Anglais to-night, and lunch to-morrow at Voisin's for you and me. Is that presumption?"

He spoke very quietly, but his fingers tightened on her arm and Grizel found herself confronted by a situation in which her own course of action was not clear to herself. But it was characteristic of her that she did not evade what must either come now or on the morrow.

"It is not presumption. It shall be as you suggest

to-night, and to-morrow it shall be *chez Voisin* for you and me. How long do you stay in Paris ? ”

“ I don't know. It depends on you. ”

Her pulses quickened a little but she spoke quietly.

“ On me ? ”

“ Yes, ” he dropped his voice, speaking low and for him haltingly. “ I am due at Biarritz on Saturday, but I am not sure I want to go. Grizel—do you want me to go ? Or will you ask me to stay on here ? I—I had not meant to speak so to you—yet, but our unexpected meeting shook my resolve. Grizel dear . . . I . . . will you honour me by becoming my wife ? I . . . I think you know how deeply I love you. ”

It had come then. She hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry. Just because her own feelings were confused a little she hesitated before replying, and Dysart spoke again more eagerly.

“ Grizel . . . if I've been clumsy, forgive me. I . . . you mean so much to me that I do not find words easy. . . . Could . . . could you . . . do you care at all for me ? ”

As utterly remote as if they were in a desert instead of the rue Tronchet at six in the evening when the street is thronged, they walked northward, each absorbed in the other.

Feeling as it were for her words, Grizel spoke at last.

“ I . . . do not know. I care for you very deeply, you have been my dearest friend . . . but I do not know if I love you or not. I . . . I ought to know, it is unfair to tell you so much and so little. And yet, believe me, I am speaking the truth as I know it. Give me time, Henry, time to readjust things in my life. It is what I need before I can answer you more truly. Will you do this ? Am I asking too much ? ”

He pressed her arm a little closer against his side, his fingers still gripped tightly around it.

"You do not forbid me to ask you again?" he said unsteadily. "You think there is some hope?"

And touched by the note of emotion so strange to hear in his voice, she answered very low:

"I do not forbid you. I think there is—some hope."

Neither of them spoke again till they were inside the Gare St. Lazare, and then it was Dysart, in his normal manner.

"Just in time. Here comes the train. I'll see you get the baggage and put you in a cab."

Much as she longed for a quiet few minutes to herself on her return home, Grizel nevertheless found it impossible, for even while she was dressing Henriette invaded her room at intervals, and it was not till home had been left behind and they were in their *loge* at the Opéra that she had time to think over what had passed.

The house was full. It was the occasion of a new singer's début, and Victor amused Henriette by showing her the many celebrities present, and after the first act, while she was discussing the audience which obviously attracted her more than the Opéra, Lewis spoke to Grizel.

"You look tired," he said. "Let me get you a footstool. There, that's better. You've had a very busy day, I fear."

She turned to him with a little start. She was so unaccustomed to being cared for in the small ways that most women accept and hardly notice that the sensation was agreeably novel.

"I am a little tired," she admitted. "Perhaps it was foolish of me to have walked to St. Lazare after tea, but the night is so frosty that walking is a joy. I love walking at night."

"Do you? So do I. But I am afraid Henriette was the culprit. Shopping is a tiring thing, isn't it? You must use the carriage to-morrow."

"I have to go to my old school to-morrow," Grizel rejoined, and they chatted till the curtain rose. Then for the

remainder of the evening they spoke very little to one another, the conversation at supper being general and wholly impersonal, but all the while Grizel had the impression of being looked after, an impression that was agreeably novel to her.

The following afternoon, when they were having tea Victor came into the room, greeted them both and asked for tea.

“ I wondered if you'd care to see a general rehearsal at the Vaudeville to-morrow ? ” he said, seating himself by Henriette. “ M. Porel is producing M. Bataille's latest play, as you may have seen. If you've never been to one of these performances it might interest you.”

Anything novel delighted Henriette and she accepted eagerly, going on to a personal enquiry.

“ When and where, Victor, is your next play to be produced ? ” she asked. “ You are writing now, are you not ? ”

“ Yes. Perhaps at the Renaissance in the spring. Nothing is settled yet.”

“ When do you work usually ? At night ? ”

“ Night and morning. I generally work for an hour or two after breakfast.”

“ Not to-day ? Or yesterday ? ” Henriette suggested, and Victor laughed and agreed, then told her the time of the rehearsal, arranged to fetch her and departed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE next day Victor called for Henriette about three o'clock, hurried her off, and when they had departed Grizel, who had arranged to go out to the convent, went to sit with her grandfather for a little and found Clievedon there, in the big chair opposite M. Lavel's. At sight of him she hesitated but M. Lavel held out his hand.

"Come, Grizel. I am questioning more about India and the North. Lewis's answers are like a breath of fresh air to me."

Grizel closed the door, slipped the fur back from her shoulders and stood for a moment by her grandfather's side.

"I merely looked in," she explained. "It is not possible to stay for I am going to St. Clotilde this afternoon."

"I wonder if I might come with you?" Lewis asked a trifle eagerly, and Grizel glanced at him and smiled.

"Why, of course! It will be charming to have company. I hear you too are going to drive up to Passy to call upon Madame Jacques?"

The last words were addressed to M. Lavel.

"Yes," the old man replied, "Louis gives me permission as the sun is out and the east wind non-existent. These children of mine are tyrants, Lewis."

Lewis had already placed his car at his host's disposal, Henriette preferring to leave Victor to make arrangements for her, and now in a short while M. Louis came in and Grizel quitted the study followed by Lewis.

"Shall we walk or take a cab?" the latter enquired as they stood on the threshold, and Grizel answered unhesitatingly:

“Walk. At least for a little.” So they set forth.

The day was perfect in its wintry splendour, the sky cloudless, the air vivifying as wine, and for the first part of the way they talked little, each too intent on the beauty of their surroundings for conversation; then, when time forced them to take a taxi, they chatted idly of the things of the moment.

Grizel's visit to the Convent lasted about half an hour, and when she emerged, Lewis had made up his mind.

“Can't we get back through the Bois?” he suggested, “I want to talk to you about something.”

“We can. It's a long way, but it is lovely. What is it?”

Lewis was silent a moment; he experienced a little difficulty in beginning, then, meeting Grizel's eyes, spoke abruptly.

“It is about Diane. I want to ask you a great favour.”

“Your daughter?”

“Yes.”

Again he was silent; it was not easy to explain without tacitly blaming Henriette.

“I go back to India as you may know, in February,” he said. “If Henriette had consented to accompany me, the child could have come too, for the climate is gorgeous where I am. But she—Henriette, I mean—dreads the life, and, of course, it's quite understandable. It would be dull for her often, for I might be sent off to any God-forsaken hole for weeks at a time. She goes to San Remo to visit her relatives when I leave England, and from there on to Naples. I don't want Diane dragged about a series of smart hotels—it's not good for her and she worries Henriette. I——”

He paused, struck a pebble out of the way with his stick and glanced at his companion.

“I want Diane kept a child,” he said rather shyly, “not turned into a precocious little woman. Lady Thurston—I wondered—I——”

To Grizel there was something attractive in his hesitation; that something prompted her to take matters into her own hands.

"Did you want me to take charge of her at my home?" she asked.

At her frank question he uttered a little sound of relief.

"Yes. I want to ask you if you would have her at Altonbury under your special care. I know it's rather calm of me to propose such a thing, but you are fond of Henriette—you are just the one person in the world I should like to have charge of my little daughter."

His shyness dropped from him suddenly and he gave her a long direct look wondering a little if he had spoken too frankly, yet unable to qualify a statement that came from his heart, finding himself disturbed by an emotion he did not understand.

Grizel did not disappoint him, instead her eyes grew luminous and the faint lovely colour deepened in her cheeks.

"That is a very charming thing to say," she said very softly. "You overwhelm me a little."

She looked away from him across the lake to the fast-thinning foliage of the opposite bank and, watching her, he felt an odd little ache in his heart, a certain queer sense of a loneliness in his life that had never before troubled him.

Presently she spoke again.

"What will Henriette say to this suggestion of yours?"

"Henriette agrees with it. I spoke of it last night to her."

Grizel nodded, and they walked for a while in silence, then she asked another question.

"Would you wish Diane to go with Kiki to school?"

"Yes. If you could watch over her the while. I am a fidget over the child, Lady Thurston, I frankly admit, but she is highly strung and takes life hard . . . she needs a placid routine . . . and she needs—love."

“ Diane would certainly have a quiet and childish life at Altonbury. I agree with you that if she is a highly-strung child a series of foreign hotels would be very injurious. Suppose I talk to Henriette to-night. You say she agrees ? ”

“ Not only that. She was enthusiastic,” he rejoined. “ Whatever you decided to do, Lady Thurston, would be right in her eyes. You have a very loyal friend in her.”

She made some quiet rejoinder and their arrival at home brought their brief *tête-à-tête* to an end.

On enquiry, Grizel found that Victor had escorted Henriette home a short while before but had not stayed, and after a hurried cup of tea she went to the study to read to M. Lavel.

She found the old man a trifle weary after his unwonted exertions, but otherwise none the worse, and indeed much cheered mentally by his outing. It seemed from M. Louis that the reception had been arranged very chiefly in his honour and he had enjoyed the afternoon’s *fêting* with the zest of a boy. Madame Jacques was the friend of half a century and at her *appartement* one met the most interesting men and women in Paris—and beyond. She had surpassed herself that afternoon, and the guests were the very people M. Lavel had always been charmed to meet. He had even consented to sing, Louis said, just a little Russian folk-song in a voice faded with age but still exquisite in its artistry, and certainly the whole thing had been a success. It was Grizel’s custom to read aloud to M. Lavel for an hour between tea and dinner, after which he rested, and now as she turned the pages of one of her grandfather’s favourite books, she felt the calming influence of his presence and the room that was so peculiarly his.

The following day was the last but one of their visit, and Grizel was occupied chiefly with Henriette, who spoke of the half-formed plan eagerly.

“ Lewis has spoken to you about Diane, hasn’t he ? ”

Grizel nodded. "He said something about it," she admitted. "But we came to no actual decision and he has said nothing since. I suppose he considered you would make the final arrangements if you wish Diane to come."

"Of course I do!" Henriette exclaimed. "She's quite beyond me, anyhow! I don't understand children, and you're a born mother, Grizel. Sit down and talk to me and we'll plan things out."

The "talk" resulted successfully. It was arranged that as she, Grizel, was travelling to England on the morrow, she should break her journey in London and make Diane's acquaintance. Then, when Lewis left for India and Henriette for the south of France, the child could be given into Grizel's charge, and that being finally settled, Grizel said good night and sought her own room. Hardly had she entered it, however, before there came a summons from M. Lavel, and hurrying to him she found him prostrated by one of the heart attacks that of late had occurred with alarming frequency.

For the moment she thought of telephoning for the doctor, but as the customary remedies took effect and fatigue born of pain brought drowsiness, she did not do so. The attack passed off quickly; there was no fear of its immediate return, and when by the gentle regularity of his breathing she realised her grandfather had fallen asleep, she quitted the room noiselessly and made her way downstairs to wait for Louis who was dining with a medical friend and would return late.

Lewis Clievedon too was out, having accepted a bachelor invitation of Dysart's, and was not expected till the small hours; the rest of the household was in bed, and Grizel, a little wearied by the anxiety of the last hour, switched off the lights in the little *salon* that led off the hall and, soothed by the firelit silence, fell asleep.

Something roused her an hour later, just as the little gilt clock struck a soft twelve, and she started up, wide

awake, fearing lest her grandfather had called. All was peaceful, however, and she was just about to lean back in a corner of the divan, wakeful but rested, when the sound of a door gently closed, then voices, came to her ear from beyond the heavy velvet curtains that screened the tiny room from the hall.

For a moment she thought M. Louis must have returned during her slumber and, rising, she was about to speak when Victor's voice, low and distinct, came to her ear and she drew back startled and perplexed, for Victor had not been to the house that evening.

He was on the upper landing from which led the dining-room, M. Lavel's study and the larger *salon*, and she could not hear what he said, but almost immediately came another voice—Henriette's—and Grizel's whole figure stiffened, for the words, hushed though they were, came distinctly to her ears.

"Victor! Lewis may come back at any moment. Yes, yes, you may come to Sloane Street next Tuesday at four Kiss me and go—quickly."

There was a moment's silence and in the midnight quiet of the house came the sound of a gasping breath followed by a murmur from Victor, and a stifled :

"Let me go!" from Henriette. Then he came silently down the stairs, passed the curtained alcove, and as silently let himself out of the house, leaving Grizel standing motionless by the dying fire.

CHAPTER IX

NOT till Victor's footsteps had quite died away on the frosty air did Grizel's tense muscles relax, then when all was quiet once more she moved slowly back to the sofa whereon she had been sitting and sank down upon it staring in front of her.

Just for the present her mind refused to grasp the full meaning of what she had so unwittingly overheard, even though her lips repeated the name of her friend over and over again. Henriette and Victor—Henriette and Victor—the thing was unthinkable and yet, and yet—— A little shudder ran through her and she passed her hand across her brow striving to realise the truth.

Over an hour before she had quitted Henriette's room leaving her nearly ready for bed, a little figure in a dainty wrap of yellow brocade, her hair tumbling in a mass of curly darkness round her shoulders, since then Victor had come secretly to the house—why? Again the shudder ran through her. Surely, surely the meeting had been but an accident, the parting indiscreetly intimate? She tried to cheat herself over and over again, but each time the conviction of the truth grew stronger, for common sense told her that what she wished to believe was impossible. Then, too, came the memory of the little happenings that had from time to time puzzled her; Victor's odd behaviour on the night of the Clievedons' arrival, his constant attendance on Henriette—Henriette's own strange words to her that first evening.

She tried to plan out what to do, but her brain seemed incapable of consecutive thought; only one thing stood

out in her mind, hideous, insistent—the guilt of her brother and the woman she so deeply loved, and beside it all else sank into insignificance. Grizel was not a woman easily moved to tears, but now after a while they rose to her eyes and ached in her throat. Henriette! Little Henriette! The friend of her girlhood, so fragile and childish and lovable . . . it was shameful . . . it was pitiful! If it was true. Even now it was grief more than anger that she felt; grief mingled with a wild desire to rush upstairs and draw Henriette into her arms, sheltering her from all that to which her sin must inevitably lead.

A cab stopping without warned her that either Clievedon or her uncle was returning, and hastily drying her eyes she switched up a light, glanced in a mirror to see the traces of her tears were not too obvious, and waited for the front door to open.

As she thought, it was Clievedon, and as it happened, in Louis's company, and summoning all her self-control, she went to meet them, speaking at once to her uncle of M. Lavel's attack. The news made Louis look grave, and he went off to visit his father's room, leaving Lewis alone with Grizel.

She hoped the latter would follow Louis's example and go upstairs, but he did not seem inclined to do so; instead he lit a cigarette, glanced once or twice around the room in an aimless fashion, then spoke abruptly.

“Lady Thurston—you are looking very knocked out.”

The remark was unexpected and Grizel who had been looking in the fire wondering if she should go up to her room or if she ought to wait for Louis's report on M. Lavel, started violently and met his eyes studying her with disconcerting intentness. Lewis hazarded a question.

“Has M. Lavel's attack been of a grave nature?”

“Not—not more than usual——” Grizel spoke hurriedly, clutching at a straw to turn his attention from herself.

“But of course he is an old man, and they are always alarming.”

She tried to find something else to say but it was useless, her brain refused to work, and turning away she made for the stairs heedless as to what he might think, her one desire being to escape any conversation with him just now. Once in her room she did not go to bed but paced restlessly up and down till Louis came to reassure her that the attack had passed off, and that for the time being all danger was at an end.

At sight of her pale disturbed look, he paused before departing.

“You look very white. Has anything disturbed you other than this?” he asked, and panic seized her, for her distress must then be obvious since he was the second who had commented upon it. Whatever happened she must not speak of what she knew until she had thought matters over and decided wherein her duty lay; so she forced a smile and shook her head.

“Dear Uncle Louis, what *should* have happened? I am tired and it is so late. My head aches a little, perhaps that is it.”

Her answer did not seem quite to satisfy Louis, however, and he stood searching her face with his keen eyes till suddenly the tension of her nerves gave way, snapping in unwonted irritability.

“Oh, Uncle Louis, don’t stare at me like that! I’ve just told you I am tired! Don’t you believe me?”

She was ashamed of her ill-temper on the instant, but Louis did not seem in the least perturbed by it. He obeyed her wishes, however, in so far that he departed, and Grizel, suddenly aware of her longing for rest, threw off her clothes, made the speediest possible toilet and hurried into bed. She had hardly switched off the light, leaving only her bedside candle, before there was a tap at her door and Louis entered bearing a tumbler.

"Just drink this," he said. "It is only bromide, but you need a good night's sleep and you will not get it as you are. Something has jangled your nerves into fiddlesticks. No! Do not talk. Shut your eyes and lie still."

He only waited till she had obeyed him, then extinguished the candle and went out leaving his niece grateful but unbelieving; she felt as though she would never sleep again and great was her surprise a few minutes later to feel drowsiness creeping over her brain and a delicious sense of peace soothing every nerve. Henriette, Lewis Clievedon, Victor, all faded to the background of consciousness and before a quarter of an hour had passed she was sound asleep.

No such profound rest came to Lewis; somehow he was ill-at-ease. After enquiring after M. Lavel of Louis, he sought his dressing-room to find the door between that and the bedroom locked and a tiny scrawled paper on the writing-table.

"Please sleep in there to-night. I am so tired.

HENRIETTE."

He screwed up the paper and tossed it away, rather relieved than otherwise, for he hated disturbing his wife so late.

The next morning Grizel was astir early, and though miserably unhappy had little time to brood, for they had an early start.

She knew she must go upstairs to see if she could assist Henriette, but she put it off as long as she could. When it was no longer possible she hurried up, knocked at Henriette's door and felt oddly dismayed by a gay:

"*Entrez!*" in Henriette's most care-free tone. Henriette herself was being hooked into her gown and waved a cheerful hand by way of greeting.

"I'm late, I know! Lewis will be shouting in a minute and I'm not nearly ready. It's so cold! I couldn't get up early."

The short jerky sentences, the laugh in the big dark eyes, the childish mischief of the vivid little face were so typical, so exactly what Grizel had always known, that for the moment a great relief came to her. It could *not* be true, this hateful suspicion; no one could be so serene, so impudently gay and bear in their breast so shameful a secret. Ready to despise herself for her unworthy belief, Grizel crossed the room swiftly and, bending, kissed the laughing face.

"When could you, lazybones? If I were that long-suffering husband of yours, I'd make you travel always by a night train, then you would have all day in which to get ready, and there'd be some hopes of catching it!"

Henriette gave a little gurgle of laughter, shook herself free from Yvonne's deft fingers, let herself be wrapped in her big sable coat and nodded dismissal.

"Go and put your things on, Yvonne. You've just five minutes."

As the maid departed, all the joyous irresponsibility faded out of Henriette's face, her voice altered, her eyes widened; with something of a child's gesture, she laid her hand against Grizel's sleeve.

"I'm glad you're coming," she said, "I—I don't want to go away from you again."

Grizel looked down at the slim little figure, hearing once again those words so softly uttered that had wrecked her peace of mind only a few brief hours ago, and the recollection stabbed like a physical pain. Wondering at the unwonted lack of response Henriette looked up and, meeting Grizel's glance, flushed crimson, then whitened till her very lips were pale; unknowingly her fingers clenched Grizel's arm.

“Grizel——” her voice shook a little, “why do you look at me like that? Why are you so—so tragic?”

She tried to laugh on the last words but the laugh was a pitiful failure, and quite suddenly she swung round, clutching at Grizel’s shoulders.

“Grizel—you don’t forget what you said, do you? What you promised? That you’d always love me just the same, whether I were bad—or good? You haven’t forgotten? You won’t forget?”

There was desperation in her voice, entreaty in the great dark eyes; in Grizel’s heart the pain stabbed deeper and settled into a dull ache. She knew her fears were true now, Henriette herself had all unknowingly confirmed them, but Henriette called her, Henriette needed her—bending, she caught the slender little figure close in her arms, only conscious of a great pitying compassion.

“Never! Never, my darling! I shall always love you, always be the same . . . don’t tremble so . . . tell me what troubles you——”

Her voice, low and exquisite in its tenderness, pierced to Henriette’s very heart; clinging desperately to the arms that held her, she raised a white face blurred by sudden tears.

“Oh, if only I could! If only I dared . . . I’m wicked and I’m frightened . . . I’m so frightened I daren’t be alone . . . and I shall go on being wicked, I know I shall! I can’t help it! I can’t!”

Her voice rang out wildly, she was trembling from head to foot; Grizel saw that in another moment all her remaining self-control must go, and that could not—must not—be allowed. Bending, she laid her cheek against Henriette’s wet one.

“Dear, that is sheer nonsense. No one is compelled to be wicked against their will; but we’ve no time for ethics now. We’ve got to catch the boat train and I hear Yvonne returning. Don’t let yourself go like this. If you need me

I will always come—nothing but my grandfather's greater need shall keep me if you send. Kiss me, and remember what I have promised."

There was a close embrace, then Henriette whirled round as Yvonne entered, and Lewis's voice was heard outside the door asking if all were ready.

CHAPTER X

THEN came the farewells to M. Lavel, whose regret at parting with his favourite granddaughter was profound.

“ You will come back soon ? ” he questioned as she knelt by his bed—the hour was too early for one so frail. “ I shall miss you terribly, my darling.”

With a swift movement she laid her head beside his on the pillow.

“ Yes, yes—and if ever you need me—seriously, I will come at once. Grandpapa, take care of yourself—take every care.”

“ You would spoil me,” the old man retorted. “ There, dearest, kiss me. I will take care.”

They embraced tenderly, all Grizel’s starved heart in her kiss, then she rose.

“ You are coming perhaps to us for Christmas,” she said. “ Don’t disappoint us. I want you to see your great-grandson ! ”

“ If all goes as we hope ! ” he answered, and with that she had to be content.

The journey was uneventful. The crossing calm, and Henriette in consequence her most charming self till physical weariness began to seize upon her, whereon she grew first silent, then irritable, grumbling at Clievedon because he had not got her a foot-warmer at once, refusing to use it when, after nearly losing the train, he succeeded in finding one.

“ Really, you are too annoying ! ” she cried, turning on him like an angry kitten. “ I hate being left like that to think you’ll miss the train.”

“But you wanted the foot-warmer,” he reminded. “You said you were cold. I ought to have thought before.” She shrugged her shoulders impatiently at his tone.

“Of course you ought! But that is no reason why you should leave me in a fever as to whether you were on the train or not. You’re most inconsiderate.”

There was a moment’s silence in which Grizel’s indignation rose in a flood, then Clievedon spoke.

“I am sorry, dear,” he said quietly, and picked up one of the papers he had just bought.

It was quite dark by now but the sky was dusted over with stars, and Grizel stared out of the window for a while able to discern the dark line of the hedges, and trying to subdue the vexation that had seized her. After all, Henriette’s behaviour to her husband was none of her business, yet remembering her own life and experience she could not but be angry at such careless handling of so precious a thing as love. For her there had been no tenderness, no quiet turning away of wrath, and she smiled a little sadly as she thought how surprised Humphrey would have been if she had expected him to think of waiting upon her at any time. Ah well, she had made a mistake, and a mistake is an unforgivable thing in the eyes of the world; she had not married a man like Lewis Clievedon and Henriette had. That was all there was to it, and presently, with a little shrug at her own thoughts, she picked up a magazine and started reading.

She was to stay the night at Sloane Street, and as they drove thither felt a little cheerful thrill of excitement at being once more in London, while Henriette, who had recovered her good temper, chattered unceasingly.

As they turned out of Pont Street, however, the cloud descended once more, following on a remark from Lewis.

“Diane in five minutes, bless her! I hope she’s fit.” That it seemed was wrong, for Henriette flashed out once again.

“Why should you suppose otherwise? The fuss you make over the child is ridiculous. You don’t worry whether I am ill or not when you are away in India.”

Lewis ignored the words as though they had never been, but Grizel felt her cheeks burn in sympathy; how could Henriette so forget her dignity or his? She was glad when Sloane Street was reached at last. A sound of flying feet on the stairs as they entered the hall, followed by a thud as those same feet leaped the last flight, and Diane had torn across the hall and flung herself on Lewis with a cry that tugged at Grizel’s heart.

“Daddy! Daddy! Oh, is it you really, you at last? I’ve wanted you—I’ve——”

Lewis held her very closely for a moment, then relaxed his grip and put her gently from him.

She swung round to greet Henriette, who kissed her on both cheeks, ruffled her brown curls, and then turned laughingly to Grizel, her good humour restored.

“Here she is, Grizel! Nearly as tall as I am. Diane, say how d’you do to Lady Thurston.”

Diane held out a slim hand, flushing under her pallor at not having seen a stranger was present.

“How d’you do?” she said. “I’ve heard of you often from Mother and Victor.”

Grizel smiled; the child’s dark beauty so like her mother’s, yet possessing the undefinable something of her father that enhanced it, delighted her. She took her hand and bent a little.

“I used to be at school with your mother,” she said. “And I’ve a sister Kiki, nearly as old as you and one a little older.”

“What a funny name!” Diane remarked. “It isn’t quite English, is it, any more than mine?”

“No, it’s French. My grandfather gave it her long ago. He is French, you know. Her real name is Veronica, but it’s so long for ordinary use.”

Diane nodded and smiled politely, but she so evidently desired to be with her father that Grizel did not keep her, but followed Henriette upstairs, while Diane rushed into the study.

There Lewis was opening the morning's letters that had not been forwarded, and his daughter perched herself on the corner of the writing-table, swinging slim black silk legs, and watching him with adoring eyes.

As he finished the final letter he looked up, saw her, and bending, kissed her hair.

"Well, sweetheart?"

"Nothing, Daddy . . . only I just *had* to come."

"Mother gone upstairs?"

"Yes. With Lady Thurston. She's quite different to what I thought. Quite. She looks so young, and she's—rather nice. I didn't think she would be."

"Didn't you?" Lewis put his arm round her and swung her down on to his knee. "Why not?"

A faint colour in the child's face proclaimed some embarrassment, but after a moment's hesitation she spoke frankly:

"She's mother's great friend, and—I don't like Mother's friends as a rule."

He laughed at that, rumpling her curls, but there was little cause for laughter, as he knew; however, he had no wish for the child to attach importance to such things, so he answered her lightly . . .

"You little rebel! Who are you to have opinions about people, I should like to know? Besides, Lady Thurston is a great friend of mine too."

"Is she?" There was manifold relief in Diane's voice. "Oh, I shall like her better then."

A maid appearing at the door with a message put an end to the subject, and a little while later, as Grizel was descending for dinner, she met Diane on the stairs, a fairy-like vision in palest pink chiffon and satin.

The child hesitated as if to speak, and Grizel smiled.

"Are you coming in after dinner?" she asked. "Because I have ever so much I should like to talk to you about."

"Have you? Yes. I'm coming down now to the drawing-room. I've had my supper, you know. Have you any other sisters besides Kiki? I mean my age."

"Not quite. But there is a boy, you know, Billy, who is eleven. Then there's a baby, only it's mine."

"Yours?" Diane echoed rather incredulously. "Oh!"

"Yes, mine. He's just eighteen months, and his name is Derek, only he is always just Baby."

They were in the drawing-room by this time and found Lewis awaiting them, whereupon Diane sprang forward and linked her arm in his, not speaking but giving him a glance of adoring love. He responded by a pressure of the slim little hand against his side, but his words were irrelevant.

"Another new frock! When did you have that?"

"It came home just after you went to Paris," she said. "It's from Clarice. Mother ordered it. D'you like it, Daddy?"

"Very much," he said, but Grizel noticed a little frown between his brows and she hastened to change the subject.

"I've been telling Diane about Kiki and the others," she said. "They've a pony, Diane, but it isn't like your Trinket. It's fat and lazy and rather old, so they have to take turns to ride. And there are two or three dogs and a big garden."

She nodded and relapsed into silence, too well-mannered to voice the longing that came to her to know those other happy children who had some one to play with all day.

Grizel noticed the look, however, and after dinner that night asked Henriette if she would allow Diane to come down to Altonbury for a short visit quite soon; to which Henriette replied that she would be delighted.

She left the next morning, bidding good-bye to the child with an odd misgiving—there was something far too wistful in the dark eyes for healthy childhood, received Henriette's tempestuous embrace, and settled herself for her journey.

She had not been home since her marriage, and she was the prey to a curious medley of feelings; so much had happened to her since she had last seen her home, and of all, the only thing for happiness had been the birth of her little son. There was joy almost unalloyed—almost, not quite; wee Derek had his father's as well as his mother's blood, and there were times when Grizel felt she could bear for him to die, now in all his childhood's innocence, nay, that she would welcome it, sooner than see him grow up a replica of Humphrey Thurston.

The train sped on, and as London was left behind the sky cleared, the air grew free from fog and smoke, and the sun crept out from behind a light film of cloud and gilded brown earth, leafless hedges, and the last dying splendour of the trees to glory. It grew colder too as the day advanced; when the train pulled up at the station where Grizel must alight, she was beginning to believe she should need the heavy fur coat she had with her.

There was a medley of vehicles to meet the London train, and on the platform a slim figure in rough tweeds, with a brown velvet tammy crammed on to a short crop of golden brown hair, holding a large bull-dog on a chain, and scanning the carriage windows eagerly.

Grizel waved and the slim figure responded, and two minutes later they were exchanging an eager welcome.

"Kiki is outside. I've got the dogcart," Gabrielle said. "Dandy'll bring your luggage. Heavens! Is that all yours?"

"Every bit. Don't forget you are rather a large party for which to bring presents. Oh, Gabs dear, it is good to see you again. How is my precious duck of a son?"

“Flourishing extremely, and you can imagine Nanny’s joy in having a real baby to look after once again.”

They passed out through the crowded little booking-hall, and there in the yard found a high red-wheeled dogcart drawn by a big, ugly, brown mare with a lean head, restless eye, rather poor quarters, and curby hocks . . . bearing the inappropriate name of Blossom.

On the driving seat controlling the fidgety animal with capable hands was a small figure clad in scarlet, her face half hidden in a cloud of loosely falling fair hair, and as the two appeared she lifted her whip in salute, and the wind coming gustily round the corner snatched up the bright hair and tossed it wildly.

An ancient luggage cart with an old white horse by name Dandy, waited just behind, and Grizel, seeing all her luggage was safely collected, climbed up into the seat beside Kiki, who was dispossessed calmly by Gabrielle and sent to the back.

“Mind your feet!” the latter said. “We’ve a heap of parcels. Kiki, don’t let the bacon slip out. Get up, Blossom!”

Blossom got up with a whisk and a clatter that sent some loiterers springing back several paces, wheeled out of the station yard and up a long hill at a shattering trot.

“She’s a bit above herself,” Gabrielle remarked as the mare shied hysterically at a gate. “We’ll take her the long way round, if you don’t mind, the next two miles’ll settle her. It is jolly to have you again at last, and Mamma is simply ecstatic.”

“That’s just like her!” Grizel’s voice thrilled a little. “There are not many women who’d welcome a—a married stepdaughter back to the house and be really glad.”

“She is though. She has given you your old room. The cherub’s nursery is of course the old nursery. Mamma wanted you to have one of the new rooms, but Nanny just

wouldn't hear of it. You don't mind the long way home, do you ? ”

“ I should like it after the stuffy train,” Grizel answered, and off they went.

Altonbury was a small market town built on two sides of the shallow valley through which the Alton gently meandered, a picturesque old place not yet spoiled by the modern small builder, possessing a very fine Gothic church—St. Michael and All Angels—a stretch of water-meadows in the valley below called the Town Meads, and two ancient inns that had flourished in the time of the second Charles. These inns, the “ King's Arms ” and “ The Crown,” were quite notable features of the town, had been rivals then and were rivals now, the one being on the main London road, the other on the big turnpike that crossed it and climbing steeply through the little town called itself Wind Hill.

This appropriately named street came in from the west, a broad rather stately stretch with fine old houses on either side and pollard elms bordering the sunny uneven pavements. On its southern side nearer the centre of the town, the splendid old church stood in its big shady burying-ground, and the street narrowed and dipped steeply past the curving many-paned windows of the “ King's Arms,” with its buff-coloured plaster and ancient oak beams, to the spot where it crossed the London road, and the Corn Exchange marked the town's centre.

To the left of this important spot the London road was called North Street and contained the principal shops, and it too was uneven and curved downhill at its further end ; and to the right it became narrow, twisting itself past the “ Crown Inn,” and was known as South Street. South Street had one or two good shops also, and contained the Conservative Club and the School of Music—a rather unexpected building in a country town—then dipped a little and became wide and sunny once more

to pass the station and run southward to a lovely wooded country.

The town prided itself on its old-world yet capable life ; it watered its streets from flattened pipes along the curbs, whence the water spurted in a row of jets at certain hours of the summer days, and its only public vehicles were the ancient coach-like buses belonging to the rival inns ; but it possessed a School of Music already noted because M. Jean Lavel taught there two days in the week.

Even the unmusical members of Altonbury society recognised the honour, for was not M. Jean Lavel the son of the great singer who had delighted Europe for many years, and was he not himself justly famed as one of the finest teachers in all that Continent ?

Three of the other week-days he taught in London, and why he had chosen to settle in Altonbury no one quite knew—least of all himself. His wife had been English, and wandering about one day, he and she had discovered Altonbury, pounced upon a house that took their fancy, and promptly bought it. When Honor Lavel died at the birth of her youngest boy nothing would have induced him to leave it, and when he married again seven years later it was to the same old grey house he brought his second wife, Lilian.

The house stood only a few feet back from the pavement, its wide low windows protected by sturdy posts and swinging chains, and sheltered from too great publicity by more of the stumpy ancient trees, and at the eastern end of the house big wooden gates led to the stables. When these gates were open a glimpse of a cobbled yard shaded by a great plane tree could be seen, but the old house kept its privacy strictly and gave no hint to the passer-by of the lovely garden that it possessed.

Now when the dogcart pulled up, the “ long way round ” having successfully quieted Blossom’s nerves, Grizel felt a queer throb, half pleasure, half pain, at the sight of the

home she had not seen for so long. Life had given her some shrewd blows since she had left it as Humphrey Thurston's bride, destroyed many illusions, shaken at times a courage that had always been high, but it had brought her the one gift above all price—a living practical faith.

Even as the trap stopped the heavy house door was opened, showing a vista of square oak-panelled hall, and Lilian Lavel stood on the threshold, her charming face alight with pleasure, for between her and all her step-children was a very real affection.

“Grizel dear, how delightful to have you at last!” she exclaimed as they kissed. “The wee boy is flourishing—I know you want news of him—and we are all excited over your return. Kiki, take Grizel's coat and furs. Grizel dear, come straight into the drawing-room and have some tea.”

Arm-in-arm they went to the drawing-room which was at the back of the house and faced across the now deserted tennis-lawn to the sloping flower-garden.

The land dipped beyond to another little valley and rose steeply, wooded to its crest, but westward the narrow defile opened and fields could be glimpsed rising gently to the horizon.

Over these fields now the sky was glorious with the flaming rose that tells of frost, paling above through purest gold to a clear wintry blue against which the opposite woods appeared black despite their autumn beauty.

The room itself, big, low and charmingly furnished, was warmed by a fire at either end—Jean Lavel hated the cold—and near one a tea-table was placed invitingly, its old Worcester china and Queen Anne silver gleaming in the ruddy light.

Kiki, having deposited the wraps in the hall and shed her own scarlet reefer, came in, followed by Gabrielle, and they all sat down to a very welcome tea, Grizel enjoying the comfortable process of spoiling and resolutely banishing for the time being the memory of that last night in Paris.

In answer to her various enquiries all three of her companions talked at once, till Gabrielle suppressed Kiki by giving her such an enormous slice of chocolate cake that her attention was quite distracted from conversation; whereupon Lilian had the field to herself.

“Your father is at the school of music till five-thirty—yes, he is very well and grumbling at the frost. Billy is out to tea with a school-friend, but Marcel will be home any minute. He is better from his illness”—Marcel, the third son, had had pneumonia earlier in the year—“but he is not quite strong yet. And how is Henriette? And Diane?”

The question put an abrupt end to Grizel’s peace of mind; unconsciously a note of reserve crept into her voice.

“Henriette is quite well. Diane does not appear very strong.”

“Henriette has no idea how to bring a child up,” Lilian replied. “Poor little Diane is indulged wildly one day and suppressed with an iron hand the next. I want to get her down here for a long visit.”

Grizel glanced at Kiki, who looked up with a grin.

“I’d show her some things!” she remarked, and Lilian laughed.

“You would, Imp!” she said. “I shiver for Diane’s morals. But certainly it’s not a healthy atmosphere for a child.”

Grizel passed her cup for more tea, trying to turn the conversation.

“She adores her father though,” she said. “I don’t think she will want to come away while he is in England.”

“We’ll have them together—all of them!” Lilian’s voice was enthusiastic—“for Christmas, if they’ll come. Victor and Gilbert will both be home, and Victor and Henriette are such old friends it will be excellent. Gabs, remind me to write to-night to Henriette.”

Then her tone changed, her attention arrested by something in Grizel's expression.

"Grizel, how white you are—you're over-tired and I am selfish talking so. Come straight upstairs and rest before dinner."

Grizel rose, relieved that it was impossible Lilian should guess the real reason of her pallor, and together they went from the room.

"Grandpapa had one of his attacks on Tuesday," she explained. "It is terrible to see him suffer. Yes, he was quite himself again before we left, but I can see Uncle Louis is anxious."

M. Lavel's illness was quite sufficient to account for that sudden look of pain, Lilian concluded, for like every other member of the family, her affection for its head was deep and strong, and she knew how passionately devoted to him Grizel was, so she spoke sympathetically as she conducted Grizel to her room—the same room she had had as a child. On its threshold she paused.

"I've had it done up," she said. "You always loved lilac, didn't you? And this door—it's new, you see—is a surprise. You shall see what the surprise is in a moment."

"Lilian!" Grizel turned with a little catch in her voice. "How charming—my favourite colour. Ah, you are good to me!"

Lilian's pretty face showed her pleasure at Grizel's tone, and she patted her arm affectionately.

"No one should find it hard to be good to you," she said.

The room was certainly inviting—the old oaken furniture, with its brass scutcheons and handles, the pale lilac of the carpet, the white-painted walls, and chintzes lilac-wreathed, the high pierced brass fender and inviting couch drawn to the hearth. Above all, the great branches of autumn leaves in the rough terra-cotta earthenware jugs that she loved.

“Of course you will have heaps of things of your own,” Lilian went on, leading the way back into the bedroom. “And if you don’t like anything you must alter it. Now for your surprise.”

She opened the other door, pushed aside a curtain, and Grizel found herself in the big nursery with its three windows, its crimson curtains and carpet, its dearly-loved Christmas Annual pictures—Cherry Ripe, Little Vanity, Bubbles, and half a score more old favourites. There was the same high brass fireguard, the big rocking-chair, and round table, the same huge battered rocking-horse that had been Gilbert’s, and her own doll’s-house that had descended to Kiki. The only difference was that when she left there had been three brass-railed cribs at the further end, now there was only a snowy-draped swinging cot for her own small son.

Lilian watched her anxiously.

“I thought you’d like to feel you had him close to you at night, even though Nanny is so excellent, so I had that door knocked through.”

This time Grizel did not speak, but she stooped her bright head and gave her stepmother a long close kiss. Love, consideration, tenderness—they had been strangers in her life so long that such abundance touched her very nearly.

She decided to unpack some of her things at once and Gabrielle came up to help her—a process that consisted in her sitting on the floor exclaiming over the dainty clothes being lifted from the trunks.

“I wish Marcel would come in,” she said. “He *is* such a darling, Grizel, isn’t he, Lilian? He’s not like a boy of nineteen a scrap—I mean in being nice. They are usually so boring and selfish, but I don’t believe Marcel ever thinks of himself at all. He’s the one we all go to for anything. Even Lilian does, don’t you?”

“I admit it! Marcel is the sweetest-tempered of you all, and I fully believe the most capable.”

"He was always a charming boy," Grizel said. "Father used to say he was golden-hearted. Rather a nice description."

"That's exactly it!" Gabrielle exclaimed. "You must guess pretty well what he is to hear such praise from his own family! He—why I believe he's coming!"

A step along the passage, followed by a knock, heralded some new-comer even as she spoke, and in answer to Grizel's "Come in," a tall, broad-shouldered boy opened the door.

"I've rubbed 'em but I'm wet and earthy," he began, but Grizel sprang up and ran to him.

"Never mind! Marcel! Dear heart, how good to see you again!"

Her arms were round him, her face uplifted, and bending, he caught her up in a long close embrace, making no immediate answer in words because all his eager Latin nature was thrilled with an emotion that choked speech and made his eyes sting. Hazel eyes, fair skin, bright wavy hair, Marcel was almost typically English in looks, but in nature he was French, more his father's child than any of the others. Grizel, eight years his senior, had mothered him from babyhood, for he had been very delicate in youth, and he had adored her in return. Now, the delicacy was nearly outgrown, he was splendidly fit, broad-chested, lean-flanked, but the devotion remained.

After a long embrace he released his sister and advanced gingerly into the room.

"I'm not fit for any carpet!" he declared, looking down at muddy leggings. "My boots are fairly all right underneath, but I feel a ruffian!"

"We'll all forgive you," his stepmother announced. "Did you get good sport?"

"Quite good. . . . I've sent some bunnies to old Samson; that was right, wasn't it? When is Gilbert coming home, Grizel, and how is Grandpapa?"

“ Gilbert is due in Paris on Thursday next. Grandpapa is fairly well, but he is failing gradually. He had one sharp attack, but his recuperative power is wonderful, and Uncle Louis is most devoted.”

“ I’m longing to run over,” Marcel said. “ I think I might soon, and come back with Gilbert. Was Victor there much ? ”

“ Very little. He has an *appartement* now, you know, and lives his own life very much to himself.”

Try as she would Grizel could not keep a note of constraint out of her voice, and Gabrielle spoke impetuously as ever.

“ Don’t you approve of Victor ? ”

“ Gabs! How absurd ! ” Grizel tried to make her answer convincing. “ But you know he is so much a stranger to me.”

“ And to us,” Lilian remarked. “ He came over for a few days in the summer—June—we have not seen him since.”

“ He is in London now,” Grizel said, and Victor as a subject of conversation was dropped.

Unpacking was a lengthy job, at which Lilian, Gabrielle, and Kiki assisted ; Grizel frankly owned to being extravagant in clothes, and she had brought numerous gifts for every one, the distribution of which took time, for many of the parcels had to be laid aside for Christmas.

She was resting an hour later when her father came up to see her, eager for the Paris news, and delighted to welcome this his beloved daughter.

M. Jean Lavel was a younger edition of his still more famous father, but a little bigger in build and supremely handsome, with a little line between his brows that spoke of a less serene temperament and a temper that withered his unfortunate pupils.

Now, however, all was peace, and his dark eyes were moist with feeling as he kissed and embraced Grizel.

“ My dearest child, how good to see you ! And you are very lovely—there is a look of my father in your eyes. What has put it there ? ”

The jerky sentences were so like all she remembered, the warm impetuosity of caresses and manner so typical, that Grizel hardly knew whether to laugh or cry. In the end she squeezed M. Jean’s arm very hard and smiled.

“ Is there, dear ? Perhaps I have learned something of the secret of Grandpapa’s strength. Life has taught me a good deal these eight years.”

He nodded, his brilliant eyes full of tenderness, one hand stroking his big Russian-cut beard.

“ We will make you so happy you will forget all the sadness,” he said presently, and then for a while they talked of things very near their hearts.

Grizel slept well that night, for which she was deeply thankful, because sleep, save in unrefreshing snatches, had deserted her since that distressing night in the rue Sol-fèrino, and she was very tired. Once, waking in the early hours, she could not remember where she was, but in a few seconds the familiar solemn tick of the ancient grandfather clock outside her room told her, and turning over she slept again in deep content at being home once more.

CHAPTER XI

It was the Monday after his arrival home that Lewis received an invitation for Henriette and himself to visit Mayhew's parents at their Leicestershire home for a week's hunting.

Sir John Mayhew was Master of a famous pack and Lewis was a keen sportsman, but Henriette had other plans, and finally succeeded in persuading him to accept for himself alone, declaring that she preferred to remain in town for those particular days.

So he departed, regretful that he was not to have her company, but looking forward to his visit with a boyish zest for the days in store, and receiving the warmest of welcomes from his host and hostess.

On the Friday he received a letter from his wife, announcing that the ball for which she had ostensibly stayed in town was cancelled owing to a death, that she was bored in consequence and was going to Highclere Towers for the Sunday and taking Diane with her. News which caused Lewis to swear under his breath and angrily screw the letter into a little ball. Highclere Towers was about as new as its owners, and in his opinion almost as objectionable ; the owner, Clarke-Hughes, having amassed a huge fortune in patent medicine and being of that trying breed that considers social success amid the smartest and wealthiest people the only goal in life worth striving for.

He had never liked Henriette's intimacy with them or understood it ; she was fastidious to a fault in most ways ; and that she should take Diane with her, really annoyed

him. It was useless to expostulate now, however, and he could only hope for the best.

When he returned on the Tuesday from Leicestershire, he found Henriette just back, intensely bored with her visit to Highclere and consequently delighted to see him once again.

She proved herself enchanting as she gave him tea, retailing her version of the visit with dainty malice and brushing aside his remonstrance anent Diane with airy indifference.

"*Mon Dieu!* It was awful! Diane had the best of it, for she went to bed at ten and they considered everything she said to be the supremest wit. Yes, ten. There are no children there and I needed Yvonne when she should have gone to bed, so what would you? They wanted the child. She is in consequence a trifle bilious. A mere nothing! Nurse is looking after her. Don't frown, Lewis! You are ugly when you frown!"

"I shall go up in a moment," Lewis observed, wishing he had done so before. "You are as irresponsible as she is, Henriette. What a pair for any man to attempt to take care of!"

"You went to Brent," Henriette said with a flash of resentment at his smile, and the smile vanished.

"I had to," he said rather low. "You refused to come with me." Then rising on the pretext of seeing Diane, left her.

He found the child on the couch by the window in the nursery, listlessly gazing down into the street; and at his entrance, not expecting her father, she did not at once turn round, thereby giving him time to note how languid and pale she was. Crossing the room he laid a hand on her hair and, starting, she looked round, met his eyes and flung herself against him with a cry of mingled relief and joy.

"Well, sweetheart," he said, sitting down on the couch

and speaking as well as he could for her strangling clutch on his neck. "What's this, I hear? Been ill?"

She let go of him, only retaining his hand and dropped back on the cushions gazing up at him.

"Oh, Daddy, I didn't know you'd come back! I asked Mamma this morning and she said she didn't know. I thought you'd be away ever so long!"

Henriette had known he was returning that afternoon and he wondered at her professed ignorance, but Diane would not let him think.

"Dad! You're looking miles away. Don't! I'm so glad you are back. It was horrid at Highclere!"

"Was it?" he played with her hair studying her the meantime. "Why?"

"They are so—vulgar!" she said, wrinkling her nose disdainfully, "and they eat so! I thought it would be fun staying up to dinner but it was not. They all talked loud and seemed so anxious about the servants and there were fat men staying there and they wore such heaps of rings. None of the women looked a bit like Mother or— or Mrs. Hewlett or Lady Mayhew or——"

He cut her short.

"They were very kind to you, Mother says."

"Oh, yes," she said wearily, "they meant to be. They *were*. Mrs. Clarke-Hughes used to be always giving me fruit and things and Mr. Clarke-Hughes took me out on a lovely pony——" her eyes sparkled for a moment at the recollection, "and he gave me a bracelet, too. I didn't want to take it, it wasn't my birthday, but when I refused Mamma was quite angry and said I was rude and ridiculous. So I had to. It's over there in my jewel case. Mamma is going to take it. Won't you see?"

"Presently," he said. "Go on, Diane."

"Then they used to play with a queer little wheel. Joyce Clarke-Hughes said it was roulette and one of the men won heaps from Mamma who just laughed. She

looked so much prettier, too, than the others. You're pulling my hair, Daddy."

"Sorry," he straightened the dusky curl absently.

"But why were you ill, Diane?"

"I got wet once. Mamma thought I was sick because I'd eaten too much. I hadn't though, really. I think it was just one of my stupid colds because my head ached and I was so hot. I was sick yesterday . . . but it wasn't eating really."

"How did you get wet? No, I believe it was not eating, dear."

Diane hesitated: for his question was a trifle embarrassing and she hoped to avoid a direct answer.

"Oh, it rained when I was out once. Nothing much. You are not going away just yet?"

"No, dear—and answer me, Diane."

"It—it was waiting for Mamma. We'd been out and she told me I could meet her at a stile in the park. I suppose she forgot. It was nothing."

He moved a little so that she could lean against him.

"How long were you waiting?"

"Not very long. Only about half an hour."

"And it rained?"

"Yes—it began to. She was with Victor."

"With Victor?" Lewis frowned. "Was Victor there then?"

"Yes. Please, Daddy, do let's talk of something else more interesting."

For the moment, however, Lewis made no answer; why had Henriette not mentioned Victor's presence at Highclere? Her silence was so unusual that it perplexed him; even disturbed him a little. After a moment he spoke again.

"Didn't your mother come at all then?"

"N—no, Mr. Jack Clarke-Hughes fetched me."

"Why didn't you go back when it began to rain?"

"Mamma said: 'Wait for me there,' so I waited. She would expect me to—and so would you if you said that wouldn't you, Dad? Don't glare!"

She laughed, trying to turn his attention from tiresome details that would assuredly get her into further trouble later. Henriette used no more reason in dealing with her daughter than with others; but Lewis refused to follow the lead and Diane wriggled down among her cushions and sighed heavily.

The sigh roused Lewis.

"Do you feel better now? Not sick?" he asked.

Diane considered.

"I feel—not sick," she said. "But my head is buzzy and stupid and I don't want to get up very much. I needn't, need I?"

"Certainly not," rather to Diane's surprise he bent and kissed her, "you are to lie quite still and presently Dr. Knox shall see you. You haven't been out this afternoon?"

"Yes. Nurse was cross and wouldn't listen and Mamma was out. Oh, Daddy, are you off already?"

"I'll come back presently," he said, rising. "I want to ring up the doctor, sweetheart, I don't like you being poorly. Who is going to ride with me?"

Her face flushed at the query.

"Do you really miss me such a lot? I'll be quite all right in the morning, I expect. Don't forget to come in presently."

Outside the room the mask of indifference dropped and he went downstairs with close-shut lips and a gleam in his eyes that augured ill for the culprit, opened the drawing-room door and found himself confronted by the hum of conversation.

His wife's exclamation cut off all hope of retreat, and though feeling anything but amiably disposed, he was forced to welcome her friends and make himself generally

agreeable, but all the time his thoughts were with his little daughter, till a remark by one of Henriette's friends, a Mrs. Hewlett, arrested his attention.

"Mr. Clievedon, I do so hope that charming M. Victor Lavel is not seriously ill? Henriette is so close a friend of his I know that I am sure you will be able to tell me how he is, for she says she knows nothing. And you are so old a friend of the family too, are you not? Dr. Buchanan my man—nerves as you know and simply marvellous!—shares the Harley Street house with Mr. Rawlinson, and there on the doorstep we met, M. Lavel and I. Well, of course, every one knows Rawlinson is *the* cancer man, so I felt a little anxious. M. Lavel is so charming, is he not, but very indefinite."

Henriette watching her husband during this monologue would have been glad to interpose, but that was an impossible matter, for Mrs. Hewlett's remarks had attracted general attention and common courtesy forced Lewis to a reply.

It came briefly and with a suave politeness his friends knew well.

"Then I fear I must follow his example, dear Mrs. Hewlett. Victor Lavel has not made me his confidant."

But Mrs. Hewlett had no intention of being so easily rebuffed.

"He is certainly looking ill," she said meditatively, as if the matter were open for discussion. "And much older, I thought. I do hope he had called merely socially, for I have never heard of Rawlinson specialising in anything else but the one thing—and it is so horrible to fear that M. Lavel——"

Intolerable as the subject was, Lewis saw the necessity for answering authoritatively and interrupted with scant ceremony.

"Lavel is knocked up," he said, a trifle surprised to find his voice so even, for it disturbed him in no small way to

hear Victor discussed in so cold-blooded a way. "He has been overworking, I know, and I should imagine your idea of a social call to be the correct explanation of his visit to Harley Street. It is quite unthinkable that it should be anything else."

That any man's health should be gossip for such people as this was unbearable; excusing himself he quitted the room with an abruptness that disconcerted Henriette, and shutting himself in his study he telephoned to the doctor. Doctor Knox would be round immediately, having just reached home; that was satisfactory at least, but it was with irritated nerves that he greeted the tall Scotsman ten minutes later and that individual noticed the signs of strain though he said nothing till the reason of his visit had been accounted for.

Then, after sitting awhile beside Diane who seemed to have become rather more feverish and disinclined for conversation, he followed Lewis once more to the study and spoke abruptly.

"I should like to see Mrs. Clievedon. You say you are only just back from the country."

"This afternoon." Lewis was already at the bell. "The child was much brighter when I saw her an hour ago."

"Yes, yes. Beautiful thing that is."

Lanky and apparently inattentive, Dr. Knox had strolled over to inspect a bronze cast of Gian di Bologna's Mercury that was near the writing-table, and the servant appearing Lewis sent a message to his wife, for even to save her feelings he felt incapable of again entering the drawing-room.

He waited impatiently till the reply came—"Mrs. Clievedon was engaged. Would Dr. Knox report to Mr. Clievedon"—and as the maid departed uttered an exclamation that brought the keen cold eyes of the Scot to his face with a swiftness belied by the indifferent manner.

"Why certainly. What difference." He spoke so equably that in spite of circumstances Lewis was calmed. "The child herself has given all necessary information—remarkably intelligently. Sit down, Clievedon."

The command rapped out like a shot, and Lewis obeying it involuntarily, the other came across to stand opposite him.

"You have no business with nerves," he said abruptly. "What is wrong with you? The child's all right for a moment but I don't want you on my hands."

"You are not likely to have me," Lewis retorted. "I never yet heard of annoyance qualifying for medical attention. What's wrong with Diane?"

Knox stroked his chin with bony fingers, leaning up against the mantelshelf and watching Lewis narrowly.

"A chill at present; I hope nothing more; but as I am not quite satisfied I shall look in again last thing. Got anybody capable of looking after her?"

"Only the nurse."

Knox dismissed the nurse with an epithet more brief than polite.

"You'll leave me free to make what arrangements I consider necessary, then? There'll probably be no need for them——"

"Of course. She is not——"

"——in danger? Not yet. Very likely won't be, but neglected chills are apt to give trouble. And you're nervy yourself, say what you like. Had a shock?"

"No. Why?"

A shrug of the shoulders answered him and no question, angry or otherwise, receiving an answer, he was forced to put the matter aside.

Directly Knox had left, he went up to Diane's room anxious to see the child again in the light of the doctor's words and she greeted him with the smile she always had for him and a hand outstretched in languid welcome.

“Daddy, dear—how nice of you to come up again! she
He sat down beside her bed for a moment.

“How do you feel now you are in bed?” he said,
scanning eyes and brow.

“Better, I think. It is nice to lie still. I shall be quite
well to-morrow, you needn’t have had Dr. Knox.”

He smiled at the amused toleration of her tone.

“Indeed, Miss Wisdom? But you see I desired him to
come, without consulting your wishes. Now do you think
if I read to you a little you could go to sleep?”

Her acquiescence was prompt, and twenty minutes later
he had the satisfaction of seeing her in a sound slumber,
the feverish colour in her cheeks changed to a more healthy
flush, her breath coming evenly, the little frown between
her brows relaxed.

It was nearly half-past seven when he quitted the room,
and much as he desired speech with his wife he knew it
would be useless to attempt it as she would be in the hands
of her maid, so he went to dress, the prey to no very enviable
thoughts.

Make what excuses he liked for Henriette he knew in
his heart of hearts that she had been grossly culpable with
regard to Diane, and he blamed himself as severely as he
blamed her. After all, Diane belonged to him as much as
to her mother, and if that mother were negligent then did
double duty devolve upon himself. Knowing Henriette
as he did he knew himself blameworthy in not taking
matters more into his own hands. That a certain delicacy,
a scrupulous regard for the rights and privileges of mother-
hood had deterred him, was now in his own eyes, no excuse.
Henriette had always declared herself lacking in the es-
sential qualities of true maternal feeling, and he should have
accepted the truth at her lips and acted accordingly. Now
thanks to his scruples, or his slackness, Diane was suffering
in a way that would have been impossible had he fulfilled
his duty as he should.

"He blamed himself, too, for not sending the nurse away at once as he had intended on that first evening at home, and his visit to Brent seemed to assume the proportions of a crime. The thought that while he was enjoying himself his little daughter was suffering neglect, was intolerable.

Just before dinner he had spoken to Henriette of Diane's indisposition, whereupon Henriette had hurried upstairs to wake her daughter by her hurried entrance, and had descended two minutes later to welcome her guests assured that Lewis was making a ridiculous fuss over a very ordinary childish indisposition.

There was a theatre-party after the dinner and a reception after that; Knox had said he was calling again late, and Lewis watching the stage with eyes that saw little perplexed himself over the immediate future. Henriette had found time to tell him very briefly that she was quite reassured upon the score of Diane's health and would naturally look for his escort. He was punctilious always in the trifling acts the gracious performance of which makes so much for the comfort of life, and if the child were really better he did not wish to spoil Henriette's evening.

On the contrary, he could not bear the thought of being out when Knox should call.

In the last interval he telephoned home, found the doctor had not been yet, and had the inspiration of going to Sloane Street during the last act. He explained to Henriette, who seemed quite willing, and hurrying off reached the house just as the doctor was entering.

"That's luck," he said, "I have been wondering how to catch you. My wife thought Diane seemed better when she saw her. I hope you'll agree."

They entered the quiet house and made their way to the nursery where Diane lay dozing, Yvonne sitting beside her in the dim light; on seeing the doctor the French girl rose.

“ M’sieur, she is very feverish. I have tried that she sleep.”

She added a few remarks in her capable and somewhat irregular English and after looking awhile at Diane, who was restless and very heavy-eyed, Knox turned to her.

“ You seem to be acting nurse as well as maid,” he said abruptly. “ Done much of it ? ”

“ My sister,” was Yvonne’s quiet reply. “ And I have to sit up for Madame. The little one likes to have me here.”

“ So I see——” Knox’s keen eyes had noted Diane’s hand stretched out half-unconsciously to the Breton girl. “ Well, I should suggest you had some supper.” He gave her a few directions as to the child, and as they left the room together turned to Lewis :

“ There’s a girl with her head screwed on the right way. Worth twenty of that fool of a nurse . . . I’ll have a couple of words with her alone if you don’t mind.”

He went back into the room leaving Lewis to go downstairs with a sense of impending trouble heavy upon him. The drawing-room was unlit, but a fire burned in the study and he had but just entered when Knox followed.

“ Well ? ” Lewis said sharply, “ what is it ? ”

“ I have just suggested to the girl yonder that she had better not attend her mistress to-night.”

There was a significance in his tone that did not pass Lewis unobserved.

“ You mean ? ”

“ That I am not quite satisfied as to the nature of Diane’s illness, and as that young French person has no nerves and a good deal of sense I may need to rely upon her. Have you kissed the child recently ? ”

“ Just after dinner.”

“ Well, don’t kiss her again just yet. Don’t look like that, man ! ”

The clock in the hall chimed the quarter before eleven ;

very soon Henriette would be waiting impatiently in the vestibule of the St. James's and wondering at the delay. The thought of the reception and the gay throng at the theatre sickened him and he caught Knox by the arm.

"What exactly do you fear?"

'Measles aggravated by a chill, threatening of pneumonia. I'm not sure yet but I shall be very soon. Has your wife been with her much?'

"Very little."

"That's as well. She'll probably be a trifle nervous about infection. I shouldn't tell her till she comes home. The girl is going to have a bed made up in the day nursery and I'll be round first thing in the morning. I shouldn't go up again now for Mrs. Clievedon's sake."

He was gone with a handshake and a bang of the street door, and Lewis realising the hour sent for a cab and paced anxiously up and down. Measles were a common childish complaint, yet Knox's manner had been grave; thinking pityingly of Henriette's distress he reached the theatre as the doors were closing, to find his wife gone and a message awaiting him requesting him to follow.

He did so with a heavy heart and in the American peeress's crowded rooms sought Henriette for half an hour in vain.

At the further end of the picture gallery he found her at last, in the centre of a little crowd of laughing people amused by something she was telling them with a vivacity all her own. They were intimates all, and as he approached he heard his wife's voice clear and silvery above the laughter and applause.

"She asks you to step, as though you were a horse, and wears pearls—priceless I agree, about the size of eggs—in the morning!"

It was impossible to mistake the mimicry that followed, and Lewis's face was a little hot as he joined the group; after all she had been the guest of these people and her

ready mockery was perilously clever. Just as he was wondering how much further mischief would lead her, she caught sight of him and broke off her narrative with a sharp exclamation.

“There he is after all! Lewis, come here! I waited hours for you, *méchant*, and now am not disposed to be very forgiving.”

She laughed into his eyes even as she spoke, and he made his way to her side, summoning a smile in return. It was hateful to think how soon he must break news that would change the joyousness he loved into anxiety and distress.

The others crowded round begging that she should continue to *raconte*, but Henriette's mood had changed and she turned to Lewis.

“They annoy me!” she said distinctly. “Take me away, Lewis, and give me something to eat. Not one of these cruel creatures ever gave a thought to the fact that I was starving.”

There was much of protest and laughter, and presently Henriette found herself having supper in a somewhat secluded corner alone with her husband. The fact seemed to have a charm for her, and she gave herself up to the pleasure of the moment and deliberately set herself to fascinate him till something in his face, control his expression as he might, arrested her attention.

Stopping in the middle of a sentence, she looked at him intently.

“Lewis,” her voice lost its low caressing tone, “what do you want to say to me?”

He started a little, but to protest was useless. Leaning forward, he took her hand across the table.

“Dear, you must not be too anxious, but Diane is ill—really ill. I didn't want to tell you till we got home, but you've seen for yourself something was wrong. You mustn't worry. . . .”

He knew, did he stand in Henriette's place, he would be

miserable with remorse and could not conceive that she should feel differently; her face paled, and she let her fingers lie in his.

"Ill?" she echoed. "Why, what is wrong? Tell me quickly."

She did care then; beneath all the assumed frivolity, beneath all the carelessness and harshness, the mother-love was alive and powerful. Despite his anxiety Lewis felt as though a weight long carried, and only noticeable in its removal, was lifted from him, and his eyes showed the feeling he could not express in words. Eager to save her anxiety he told her half the verdict.

"Knox fears measles," and was startled by Henriette's exclamation of dismay as much as by the violent gesture with which she thrust away his hand.

"Measles? And you've just been with her? How dare you let me run such a risk? Why didn't you telephone and I would have gone to Vivien's. You could have had my things sent. You should not come near me after being with her."

The point of view was so diametrically opposed to what he had conceived that for the moment he was speechless, and Henriette, profiting by his silence, spoke again.

"Really, Lewis, I think you are the most inconsiderate man in the world! You know my horror of illness, and you come straight from the child to me, regardless of infection. Perhaps you propose that I should nurse her?"

Her angry little speech gave him time to recover himself; now at her last words he drew back his chair and rose to his feet.

"Yvonne is doing that," he said quietly, and met Henriette's blazing eyes with all the tenderness gone from his own.

"Yvonne? Yvonne? How dare you say such ridiculous things? Yvonne belongs to me. Nurse will look after Diane."

“Unfortunately, Henriette,” Lewis’s voice was ice after the heat of his wife’s tones, “Knox prefers Yvonne and so does Diane. He considers nurse partly to blame for the child’s illness in insisting on taking her out in the east wind to-day when she complained of feeling unwell.”

“But me?” Henriette threw out her hands. “What am I to do? Whom do you propose giving me in Yvonne’s place? How dare Doctor Knox express such an opinion with regard to the nurse? As for Yvonne——”

“Yvonne,” Lewis said very quietly, “stays where she is: with Diane. I am more than sorry to inconvenience you, Henriette, but on this occasion I fear it cannot be helped. No doubt we can find another maid temporarily to take Yvonne’s place.”

For a moment she stood facing him, only her pallor and quick breathing betraying her agitation. Then at his little movement to leave her she broke into a torrent of words, none the less passionate because subdued.

One of her late audience sauntered up, saw something was wrong, and moved away more quickly, and Lewis stood silent and waited for the storm to spend itself.

“It is always Diane, always! For me and my convenience or happiness you care nothing! If I were ill, would you care? Would the house be turned upside down for me? Of course not! Did you care whether I was ill or well when you went to India? If you had cared you would have given India up and stayed at home. It is unbearable that my own child should take my place, and I will not have it! I will not! If Diane is ill she shall have a hospital nurse to attend her. . . . Diane—Diane—Diane! I wish she had never been born!”

She broke off, gasping a little, and moving swiftly to her side, Lewis took her by the arm, not ungently yet in a manner she was powerless to disregard.

“As we do not want all London to hear our troubles I suggest we go home,” he said.

He spoke pleasantly, and was thankful that she did not actively resist him; when they were in the carriage five minutes later he looked for a further outburst, but it did not come. Instead, she crushed herself far back in her corner, and only when they passed under lamps could he see her face, pale and fragile in the dim light, turned half away from him.

She let him hand her out, and preceded him into the study, where the wood fire was burning cheerily.

Lewis disliked keeping his servants up late, and things were placed ready and left, so he busied himself pouring out wine and mixing a whisky and soda, glad of the excuse to occupy his attention.

Henriette took the glass he handed her, touched the wine with her lips, and set it aside, silence still complete between them, for Lewis was disinclined for his usual rôle of peacemaker, and showed no disposition to talk.

Outside, a belated hansom jingled by, and suddenly Henriette rose.

“Perhaps,” she said without looking at him, “you will be kind enough to unfasten my dress, since you have taken my maid away from me.”

Lewis bit his lip, but his tone was pleasant enough.

“With pleasure. You are ready to go upstairs now?”

“One may as well, since there is nothing to keep one here,” she flashed resentfully. “I do not find you a very entertaining companion, Lewis. What happened at Brent to make you so distraught on returning?”

The question was uttered carelessly enough, but in view of the annoyance that visit had caused him, it was enough to fret nerves already jarred by anxiety. He answered her shortly, and was surprised when she broke into tempestuous tears, clinging to him like the child he sometimes thought she was.

There was nothing for it then but to devote himself to soothing her, never an easy task, and nearly two hours had passed before she lay quiet in his arms, her riotous tangle of curls tossed across the pillow and his shoulder, only a catch in her breath telling of the storm that was over. He was very tender with her ; something in her fragile appearance curbed his naturally hot temper when dealing with her, but this reconciliation brought him no relief, for it was plain the cause of the trouble still remained, and he looked for a renewal of it in the morning.

His fear was justified ; Henriette woke late, and the parlourmaid, summoned to assist in Yvonne's place, had no easy time of it. Lewis, coming down from the day-nursery, was greeted by the sight of the girl quitting her mistress's room in angry tears, and was himself refused admittance. At ten Doctor Knox gave his verdict—measles aggravated by a slight attack of pneumonia, and Lewis went upstairs to his wife's room hoping he knew not what. He was greeted by semi-darkness and a moan from the bed, and on going to its side found Henriette with closed eyes and white face.

Regretfully he spoke—

“ Henriette ! ”

She did not open her eyes, but her forehead contracted nervously.

“ Please do not . . . ” she said half under her breath. “ My head is unbearable . . . and there is no one to attend to me. Please go.”

No word of enquiry for the child. Lewis was conscious of a dull little ache of disappointment, but he did not give it voice. Instead, he laid his hand over hers.

“ I am so sorry, dear,” he said very gently. “ Perhaps I can do something. Shall I bathe your head ? ”

His touch seemed to annoy her, for she moved petulantly.

“ No. You have other things to do.”

“No,” he said patiently. “There is a nurse coming for Diane.”

“A nurse?” Henriette opened her eyes, amazingly large and dark in her small pale face. “Why? Has Knox made up his mind?”

“Yes. As he thought. The pneumonia is slight, thank God.”

“That is infectious too—a germ at least.”

She lay silent for some minutes, then turned her gaze full on him.

“Will you go now, Lewis? And send Emily back to me. She is an awful fool, but I must have some one.”

He obeyed at once. There was nothing else for him to do, but as he sat in his study supposedly answering letters he faced the fact that Henriette did not care. For years he had deliberately made excuses for her, but now excuses were useless . . . and the truth was no pleasant one to consider.

Luncheon time found him at the India Office, summoned there unexpectedly, and when the important interview was over he had the meal with the still more important interviewer. Not till well after three did he reach home, following a hurried telephone call to know how the child progressed, and there as he entered an extraordinary stillness struck him. Turning to a maid who was at that moment descending the stairs, he enquired if his wife were in.

For a moment the girl looked puzzled; then she glanced away.

“Mrs. Clievedon has gone, sir.”

“Gone?” Lewis echoed the word uncomprehendingly.

“She is out, you mean?”

“No, sir. She has gone away.”

For an appreciable time Lewis stood absolutely still, then with no further word he passed on upstairs, entered his wife’s room, and found Emily busily clearing up after the

business of hurried packing. At the sight of her master she rose from where she had been kneeling folding garments in a long drawer, and took a note from a small table.

"I was to give you this, sir, directly you came in," she said, and resumed her work.

He took the note, walking away to the window to read it; a short and characteristic effusion.

"DEAR LEWIS,

"My nerves are so shaken with all this worry that I have fled to the country. Donnisthorpe is not very far away, and I wired Aunt Felicité this morning; so you can keep me informed night and morning how Diane is. It is wiser to go away, as I suffer so much that I am really useless, and it is no good my getting ill too. Please let me know the exact news.

"HENRIETTE.

"P.S.—I shall stay at Donnisthorpe just a week and then probably come up to town and stay at an hotel till Diane is past the infectious stage. It is foolish for me to run into danger."

He read it through twice, then, pushing it into his pocket, went out of the room and downstairs to the study. On the writing-table work was waiting to be done, and with mouth and jaw set grimly, and the little upright line deepening between his brows, he sat down to begin.

CHAPTER XII

NEARLY a month later Gilbert arrived in London, having spent a good deal more time in Paris than he had intended, rang up Lewis, and, fixing a time, met him at White's for luncheon.

Their greeting after six months was a warm one, but as they sat down Gilbert looked frowningly at his friend.

"You're not looking at all fit," he said. "What's wrong?"

"Diane has been ill. Measles and a mild attack of pneumonia."

"Really? I'm very sorry. She better?"

"Yes, she's beginning to pull round now, but it's been a very anxious time of course."

"Of course. Poor kiddie. And Henriette?"

"Henriette is away at present."

The tone permitted no further questioning, and Gilbert, with one of his odd grimaces, turned to the wine-list; he watched Lewis narrowly, however, as they talked during the meal, his keen eyes noting the dragged lines about the eyes and the grim set of the mouth, and when it was ended suggested a walk across the Park as he had an appointment in Harley Street.

He was not satisfied with Lewis, and he meant, if possible, to discover what had changed him, subtly enough it was true, but changed him nevertheless. The mention of Harley Street, however, had recalled something to Lewis's mind, and he spoke of it to his companion as they walked.

"I saw Victor the other day and he's looking ill. Is anything wrong with him?"

Gilbert gave him a quick look.

"I've not seen him yet. He's been away from town. What seems wrong?"

"He looks played out."

"I'll look him up to-night," was Gilbert's reply, and the subject dropped.

Later he went round to his brother's rooms, for rather to his surprise Victor had refused to fall in with the suggestion that he should join the two friends in Sloane Street for dinner, perplexed by the shadow that rested upon Lewis's home and by Lewis himself.

Victor had rooms in Arlington Street when he stayed in town, and Gilbert went to his brother's sitting-room.

Victor was standing by the writing-table as he entered, sealing a letter, and swung round with outstretched hand and pleased exclamation.

"My dear old man, how good to see you! How are you? Well?"

Gilbert gripped the outstretched hand, smiled his queer one-sided smile, and dropped into a chair.

"I am always well!" he said. "Uninterestingly so. What a blighter you were not to come round to us. Why didn't you?"

Victor squirted some soda-water into the tall glass he held.

"I didn't want to turn out again," he said briefly. "Say when."

Gilbert nodded, stretched out his hand for the glass, and gave his brother one long searching glance, frowning a little as he did so, then with a scarcely perceptible shrug began asking and retailing news of other things.

For an hour they talked, deep in comfortable chairs on either side the hearth, exchanging information, gossip, ideas, and all the while, despite the seeming careless ease, the elder man was studying the dark saturnine face opposite him, noting signs that were only for a doctor's

eye, even when he seemed absorbed in some irrelevant matter.

The clock on the big carved writing-table struck eleven, breaking on the first silence, and as the last stroke sounded Gilbert spoke abruptly.

“How long have you been in pain like this?”

Victor had risen to get another drink, and was standing back to his brother. At the words the frail crystal glass slipped between his fingers and shivered on the floor. For a full moment, however, he stood rigid, as though turned to stone; then he faced his brother.

“What do you ask me that for?” he said.

Gilbert had not changed his lounging attitude, and all he did now was to remove his pipe for a moment from his lips.

“For reasons extremely obvious, my dear Victor—to a doctor.”

Tone, posture, words, were casual enough, but the alert brain behind the keen eyes was registering every shade of expression that crossed the ashen-white face of the man before him. Then as Victor made no reply he suddenly laid his pipe on the table beside him, rose to his feet, and picking up a small table-lamp that stood near, switched on the light full in Victor's face. Victor spoke then, thickly.

“Damn you—what are you doing?”

“Finding out to the best of my ability what you won't tell me,” Gilbert answered dryly. “D'you think I'm blind?”

He put the lamp down as abruptly as he had picked it up, switched off, pushed Victor gently enough into his chair, and mixing another drink, handed it to him.

“I'd like to have a look at you, if you'll let me,” he said, and turning away took up his own glass carelessly enough, but as he filled it an odd little clink sounded as the decanter jarred against its edge. The tell-tale sound set grim lines about his mouth. He was inordinately long squirting in

the soda, but when he turned round, his hand was quite steady again, and Victor's glass was empty.

"You're in pain," he said. "And you're frightened—no, don't say you're not. I shouldn't believe it. Besides—"

He broke off, gulped a mouthful or two of his drink, and set the glass down again.

"Have you seen any one?" he asked.

There was no reply for a moment or two; only the shallow quick breathing of the younger man breaking the silence. Then he spoke, licking his dry lips.

"Yes. Rawlinson."

Gilbert took the answer with no visible sign of emotion, but with speech something of the frozen look of horror faded from Victor's face; he waited in his turn for an answer, and as it did not come the mask of immobility dropped from him and all his hot Latin blood rose.

"Gilbert!" he said hoarsely. "Gilbert!"

Gilbert took two swift strides forward and laid his hand on his shoulder, pressing heavily.

"Steady, old fellow," he said hardly above his breath. "I'm here. Steady."

He felt the shoulder trembling under his grasp, felt Victor's fingers slide up his hand and grip his wrist, and his mouth worked and the soft lights across the room blurred.

The old love of boyhood, before life separated them so widely, seemed to clutch at his heart with Victor's steel-like grasp on his wrist, and choked speech in his throat. Victor spoke first.

"What do you want to know? I'll try and tell you."

Gilbert drew a long breath, paused a moment, then, removing his hand, strolled across the room and picked up his pipe.

"A few things for my own satisfaction," he said in his ordinary tone. "First: when did you begin to think Rawlinson was the man to go to?"

"About ten months ago. The pain came on very gradually. It's only intermittent now."

"What made you go to him?"

"The queer ache of it . . . there seemed no reason for pain at all. And I got tired . . . and out of sorts altogether."

"What did he say?"

"He advised me to wait. I went again and he said six months before having an operation."

"When is the six months up?"

"March."

Gilbert grunted, cursed his pipe which refused to light well, and threw himself back in his chair again.

"I should like to have a run over you, if you'd let me," he said. "Also tell me this——"

He asked a few curt questions which were purely medical, nodded, and sat silent for a while; then Victor spoke again.

"We shan't be disturbed. You'd better do what you want now."

The examination was brief and only a rather unaccustomed pallor beneath the elder man's tanned skin betrayed the fact that this overhauling meant anything personal to him.

When it was ended he nodded.

"There's nothing more to say at present, of course. You'd better get out of town though. Why don't you go down to Altonbury?"

"I could not do that," Victor said shortly. "The quiet would drive me mad. I'll go later."

"You ought to go there next month and get up strength as much as you can. By the way, you want this kept quite quiet, I suppose?"

Victor shivered, spreading his long fine hands to the blaze.

"Please."

“Right. Now I must be getting back. Lunch with me to-morrow?”

“I—I’m afraid I can’t,” Victor said hesitatingly. Whereupon Gilbert nodded.

“That’s all right. I shall ring you up about half-past ten. Good night, old fellow. Keep up heart. I’m not at all sure that I agree with Rawlinson.”

He was gone before Victor could reply, and in a very few minutes was walking down Piccadilly as fast as his legs would take him, mouth twisted with pain, fierce resentment in his heart at the ignorance of cure that prevailed for this most dreadful ill.

He found Lewis still up and writing letters, and quite suddenly an idea struck him.

“Look here, I go on Friday,” he said. “Come down with me and bring Diane. You say Henriette won’t be back, so you might just as well. It will do the kiddie good.”

Lewis scribbled off a last address and tossed the letter to a pile of others.

“It sounds delightful. What of your people?”

“They’ll like it. I shall wire to-morrow, for you look a bit fagged. And now I’m off to bed, so farewell!”

He did as he said early on the morrow, ringing up Victor to suggest he joined them, but Victor refused, so only the two men and a very excited thirteen-year-old girl set off on the following day.

To Diane the short hour’s journey was pure joy—with the prospect of four days of her father’s company; and not being in the least shy she looked forward eagerly to meeting the brothers and sisters of whom Lady Thurston had spoken.

She was very tired, however, when the station was reached, and Lewis felt a little anxious about her as the train came to a standstill.

“Nearly there now, dear,” he said. “Get your coat on.”

He muffled her into the squirrel coat that reached her

knees, gathered his own belongings together, and as he alighted came face to face with Grizel, who had just greeted her brother.

"We are so glad you could come," she said as they shook hands. "And Diane too. You look very tired, dear, but we shall soon be home now. I've got the brougham because of her, Mr. Clievedon."

As they made their way to the station yard Lewis spoke tentatively.

"Should you mind if I didn't drive?"

"Would you rather walk?"

"Immensely, if I might! I'm cramped with sitting so long, but——"

He paused, glancing from one to the other, and Gilbert solved the riddle by putting Diane into the brougham and jumping in himself.

"Well, I shan't accompany you!" he said with a laugh. "Diane and I will get to our little fireside. Grizel is the walker. She can show you the way."

"I shall enjoy it," Grizel said frankly. "Good-bye, you lazy pair. Come, Mr. Clievedon."

They turned up a narrow road as the brougham started, but not for some time did either of them speak; Grizel, because she had when in the company of people she liked a great capacity for silence; Lewis, because a multitude of thoughts were surging through his brain.

He was amazed to realise how pleased he was to meet Lady Thurston again, and as they swung on side by side he glanced at her with the warmth that had so surprised him deepening in his heart. He felt that in some way this walk was advancing their friendship, and insensibly something of the weight of depression that had bowed his spirits since the day of Henriette's departure began to lift.

He had not known himself how much these last weeks of strain had told upon him till he found himself walking along the quiet road with the smell of wet earth and leaves in the

air from the wood on the left, and the pale blue of the sky above giving promise of frost to come.

Emerging from the trees into a more muddy road the vision of the western sky flushed with sunset met their eyes, and its beauty, seen through the thinning branches, unlocked Grizel's tongue.

"Oh, how beautiful!" she said. "Look at those tiny clouds the colour of rose. I'm glad we came this longer way instead of through the town. You are not tired?"

The fact of his silence suddenly obtruded itself and she turned to him anxiously. "It's damp and horrible under foot, isn't it, but that sky is worth a trifle like muddy boots!"

He met her eyes and smiled.

"On the contrary I am more rested than I have been for days."

"Diane's illness must have been a very anxious time," she said. "Is she really progressing now?"

"Yes. But she doesn't get up strength much. I suppose the time of year is against her."

"And being in London. Mr. Clievedon, won't you let her stay with us for a little, or d'you feel you can't spare her? If you could I am sure she would grow stronger more quickly. The air is so good, and Kiki and Billy would be such wholesome companions. Do think it over. I believe Henriette would trust her to me."

For a moment the temptation to speak plainly to his companion was strong; Lewis found himself longing to talk of all the conflicting doubts and questions that of late had thronged upon him. She would understand, of that he felt certain, and also she would be able to give him a clear and sensible opinion about both the past and the future as regarded Henriette and Diane. That subtle gift of sympathetic insight was hers in no small degree, and he knew it and found himself sorely tempted to ask her advice. Perhaps he had been too hard in his judgment of Henri-

ette's conduct; Grizel Thurston was clear-eyed enough to be able to tell him—yet even as the desire held him he recognised its utter impossibility. He could not discuss his wife even with the friend who so deeply loved her.

Turning over these thoughts in his mind he quite forgot to answer the words that had led up to them, and not for some minutes did he speak again. Then realising, he attempted vainly to apologise.

She laughed off his words.

“You were so absorbed that I knew I had started some train of thought,” she said: “We'll speak of my suggestion later. Here we are.”

She rang the bell and at that instant the little door in the big stable gates opened and a red setter pup, lovely and exceedingly affectionate, bounded out with a waving of fringed and muddy paws and an ecstatic wriggling of a slim body.

She sprang for Lewis mutely beseeching him to allow himself to be licked and muddied, and as Grizel pounced for her collar, Marcel came round from the stables, saw the predicament, and whistled the excitable puppy to heel.

“Clievedon! This is jolly! Lilian told me Gilbert had wired yesterday and that she had wired back, but somehow I never really thought you'd come. I've just been making Diane's acquaintance. She says she remembers me though she was only six.”

“You were in Etons when I saw you last,” Lewis retorted. “And I assure you it is even jollier to be here.”

“The others have arrived half an hour ago,” Marcel said as they made their way to the house. “Kiki is wild with excitement at having a girl to play with. She doesn't look very fit though, Clievedon. I told Kiki she must go slow and she promised.”

“That's all right then,” Grizel said, feeling rather relieved. “Kiki never breaks her word. Mr. Clievedon, you must be dying for tea. We'll have it at once.”

Lilian was waiting to welcome them, and beside her was Gabrielle talking to Diane, the latter ensconced cosily in a corner of a big settee.

Lewis was an old friend of the family, and in a few minutes when conversation was general Grizel relieved Gabrielle who she knew was longing to talk to her brother and took the place by Diane's side.

"You've had some tea, haven't you?" she questioned. "You are looking very tired, dear."

"I'm afraid I am rather tired," Diane spoke politely, evidently fearing her weariness might be construed a fault. "My head aches a little. It's only the train, you know," she added quickly.

Grizel drank her tea and rose.

"Would you like to come upstairs with me to the nursery?" she said, speaking for the child's ear alone. "I'm going to give my baby his bath."

At the suggestion Diane's weary eyes lit up.

"Oh, I should love to!" she said, and slipping her hand through Grizel's arm, got up. "How old is he?"

"Just a year and a half. And he never cries in his bath, so he won't tire you. We'll slip away now."

Lewis saw them move, and meeting his daughter's eyes, was surprised at her radiant smile; only a few minutes ago he had been worried at her inert pallor. Now he went on talking to Lilian with relief, but found himself wondering once or twice, nevertheless, where Grizel had gone.

It was Gabrielle enlightened him unintentionally by enquiring for her sister a little while later, and Marcel who answered.

"She's gone to bath the baby," he said. "I expect she took Diane with her because she thought it might be amusing. He's a jolly little beggar, Clievedon. You ought to see him."

"I should like to," Lewis replied and glanced at Lilian. "I wonder if I might join Diane?" he said.

“Would you really like it? Of course then! Grizel will be immensely flattered, and the boy looks an angel in his tub.”

“I’ll take him!” Kiki announced, springing up from the hearthrug. “Come along, Mr. Clievedon. Only I won’t come in, I don’t care for babies.”

“Kiki!” Lilian touched the child’s bright hair. “Suppress yourself, if you can. I’ll take Mr. Clievedon because I do like babies,” and smiling she turned to her guest. “Come then, this way.”

“What a charming house this is!” he said as they went upstairs together. “I like it more every time I come. Gilbert is looking very fit, don’t you think?”

“Very. He is as hard as nails. I don’t think I could say quite the same of you, Lewis. You don’t look yourself somehow.”

He shrugged his shoulders; they were old friends, Lilian and he, and had a warm regard for each other.

“I’ve had rather an anxious time,” he said lightly. “It will be better now. Ah! We’re here.”

The sound of Diane’s laugh came through the door as Lilian paused to knock; there came Grizel’s voice with the echo of laughter in it bidding them enter, and they went in, Lilian closing the door behind them.

“I’ve brought Lewis up to see Derek,” she said, and Grizel made some rejoinder, but what it was Lewis did not know. He did not know anything save that the scene before him was in an infinitesimal space of time stamped for ever on his brain.

By the fire, her golden hair tumbled in wild disorder from the baby’s clutches, her sleeves rolled up, and a big white flannel apron covering her frock, sat Grizel, and on her lap, naked, rosy, his bright curls glistening, his fat little legs kicking and his gurgles of joy filling the air with sound, lay her baby son. But it was at Grizel Lewis looked, Grizel a trifle surprised at their visit, lifting her flushed cheeks

and laughing eyes in welcome; and even as the colour drained out of his face so it seemed to Lewis that every drop of blood drained out of his heart.

Mechanically he moved forward following Lilian, and with a wild rush the blood surged through his veins once more hammering deafeningly in ears and brain.

“Sit there, Mr. Clievedon.”

“Daddy, isn’t he a cherub?”

“I hope you don’t mind us coming, dear.”

Lewis took the chair Grizel indicated, and though a close observer might have seen that his hands were trembling there was otherwise no outward sign to betray the storm of emotion that was surging through every nerve turning his blood to fire and making his brain reel.

Meanwhile Grizel was speaking in some amusement.

“I am so sorry, Mr. Clievedon, that when I invited Diane to be present at this domestic scene it should not have occurred to me to extend the invitation to you!”

“Daddy knows nothing about babies!” Diane put in, leaving the entrancing cherub for one moment to fling herself against her father’s knees. “I expect he thought I should be a nuisance to you, Lady Thurston, and came after me to see.”

Short as the respite was, it was enough for Lewis, schooled as he was to a habit of self-control, and save that his voice was a trifle hoarse, it was as usual.

“Partly that, you imp, I own; but I wanted to see Master Derek too.”

Grizel, who was endeavouring to keep a giant powder-puff from her son’s hands, looked up swiftly.

“And now that you have, what do you say?”

Lewis met the shining grey eyes with a smile.

“I echo Diane’s pronouncement,” he said. “He is certainly a cherub.”

She laughed, well pleased, and caught the little warm

body up in her arms, snuggling her face into the delicious curves of neck and arm.

“Yes, bless him! Diane darling, pass me the vest and that nightie.”

Delighted to be of service, Diane handed the little garments from the airing-horse where they were warming Lilian making some comment, and Lewis got up abruptly.

“There’s a draught from that window—the curtain isn’t properly drawn,” he said, and crossed the room to put the hanging right, thankful for the excuse to move.

The curtain refused to be instantly adjusted, and when he returned baby Derek was in his little nightgown and Grizel was on her feet.

“I’m going to put him in his cöt,” she said. “He’s getting drowsy. Say good night to him now, Diane dear.”

She waited as Diane pressed eager lips to his cheek, then laid him in the dainty lace-hung cöt, tucked the little blue blankets round him, and bent for a moment over his curls.

As she straightened herself again Lewis came to her side, and their glances met. There was all Grizel’s soul for the moment in her eyes, and he bent hastily over the sleepy little bundle, feeling he had seen something that was not for his eyes, and let his lips touch the cheek that nestled like a rose petal upon the pillow.

A moment later Grizel had turned down the light and was leading the way from the room, her face very grave, her eyes a trifle perplexed, for as Lewis raised his head from kissing her little son, she had seen great drops of sweat glistening on his forehead.

CHAPTER XIII

LEWIS sought his room as early as he decently could, flung the window wide, letting the cold air rush into the quiet chamber, and sat down by it, staring into the starlit night.

This thing that had happened to him had been so unforeseen, so overwhelming, that any resistance or refusal of acknowledgment would have been merely absurd. But it was necessary all the same that he should face matters without delay, for all around was danger, and he was utterly adrift.

The habit of self-control, taught first in childhood and engendered in his work, had suppressed all outward expression of violence in his nature, but he had always known possibilities of such violence were there. He had known also that there were depths Henriette had never sounded; but such knowledge he had put from him, and now, with no warning nor reason, a catastrophe had occurred, the limits of which could not be reckoned with. He was honest enough with himself not to draw a blind as it were before his mental vision; this love that had come uninvited into his heart was no ephemeral passion to be gratified stealthily or fed by miserable covetings, no despicable lust. It was rather in the nature of a blinding light, flooding his whole being; a thing as much of the soul as of the body, the veritable desire of his life,—and as such it had got to be reckoned with.

He wondered if he had been to blame in not foreseeing danger in the pleasant intercourse that had sprung up between himself and Grizel Thurston, and knew he was acquitted. There had been no warning by which he could

have realised his position, and there lay the horror of the whole thing. If this thing could happen so suddenly and with such appalling strength, wherein lay safety for the future for Grizel or himself? For the moment it was not of importance whether she cared for him or no—overwhelming sincerity of emotion in one person has a way of infecting others, for the time being at all events. For the first time in his life he felt incapable of trusting his strength; his will had played traitor and he was defenceless. There then lay the risk.

Presently his thoughts took a new turn and a more personal one. He found himself going over all the hours which he had spent in Grizel's company up till the fatal moment only a little while ago, and in all of them he could not trace one incident that might have warned him. Nature had stepped in, sweeping away all but the primitive things of life, and the sight of Grizel, with her son in her arms and that light in her eyes that he had never seen before, had left him helpless in the grip of a force he had refused to recognise.

After a while he rose mechanically to close the window, and as mechanically began to undress; his physical self began to obtrude its weariness, and his brain refused to grapple longer with the problem that seared it. His movements, quiet as they were, reached his dressing-room, and presently Diane's voice called very softly.

Here was one familiar fact of life still unchanged. With something of relief, he took a candle and went to her, finding her curled up among the pillows, sleepily awaiting his last kiss.

"I have been to sleep," she murmured as he bent down. "Isn't the baby a darling . . . and Marcel . . . Marcel . . ."

Her voice trailed off into a drowsy murmur and her dark lashes drooped. Stooping, he kissed her, and went softly out of his room.

It was rather a surprise to him that he slept and slept well, to awake with the sunlight pouring in at his window and to find Diane, a bewitching little figure in her scarlet silk dressing-gown, sitting cross-legged at the foot of his bed.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "Why—what—Diane, you imp, how long have you been there?"

"Only two minutes. Just to surprise you." She climbed along till she could kiss him and smooth down the short crisp hair, then jumped down.

"I'm not a bit tired!" she cried. "And I'm dreadfully hungry. Do be quick and get up!"

"I will if you'll depart," Lewis rejoined, "and I'll eat your breakfast as well as my own. Off with you!" And she fled.

He dreaded meeting Grizel, yet longed for it, but the reality was not so disturbing as he had feared, for conversation was very general, and when the meal was over she disappeared for a while. Gilbert suggested a ride, to which Gabrielle assented, Kiki begged to go too, and on consideration of Diane's presence was given leave from lessons, but was refused the ride, and Lewis, feeling oddly disinclined for his friend's company, declined.

He watched them off, however, then turned to Marcel who was at his side.

"I think I should like a tramp," he said. "Ah, here's your sister."

Grizel, tweed-clad and smiling, came across the gravel to them and spoke to Lewis.

"Kiki has taken Diane in hand and proposes to take her out in the pony cart. Billy is with them, and they wanted to take Babs but I refused. If you two are going to walk I'm coming with you. It's such a glorious morning." It was not what Lewis had intended, but there was no help for it, and Marcel's company was an effective barrier to any intimate conversation.

Once or twice, however, as they tramped, it occurred to

him that Grizel was looking pale and tired, very different from the radiant young mother he had seen the previous evening, and she was certainly very quiet. From noticing he came to wondering and from wondering to worrying, whereupon a fresh pang stung him. Her troubles were not, could not be, his; it was not his place to offer help or sympathy. Before yesterday friendship might have permitted what a knowledge of love denied, but not now.

He realised miserably that enlightenment had put a bar to an intercourse that had been very pleasant, and so thinking he too relapsed into silence, leaving Marcel to make what conversation he could.

Had he known it, the reason for Grizel's silence was one that concerned himself very nearly—a letter from Henriette suggesting the very thing that she herself had suggested—namely, that Diane should stay on at Altonbury if it were possible. The request was pleasing, but the letter brought back to Grizel's memory the very thing she was trying to forget, and now the old perplexity had her in its grip once more. Surely, surely, what she feared could not be true; there was some mistake; it was a glaring indiscretion, a folly—Henriette was as irresponsible as a child and dangerously fond of admiration. She could not be what that miserable episode implied, and so for the rest of the morning the questioning fear stayed with her.

At luncheon some chance question of Gabrielle's set Gilbert off on the subject of Frontier politics, a subject for discussion that lasted most of the afternoon—which had turned wet—carried on by the study fire, while the rain lashed the windows and the wind whistled drearily in the keyhole.

“Bore we're dining out,” Marcel remarked towards tea-time. “It's Lilian's fault.”

“Marcel, don't be so unjust!” Lilian exclaimed from her seat near the window. “I've got you out of going twice, and now you will just have to put up with it.”

“Where?” Gilbert enquired, knocking his pipe out on the grate. “Brynwood? The devil!”

“It’s worse than you think,” the boy said tragically. “We shall have a bad dinner and worse music, and Mrs. Rawlinson will——”

Gilbert interrupted him sharply.

“Rawlinson?”

“Yes. He’s a retired judge. She’s a terror. He’s brother of the famous Rawlinson, the cancer man. He’ll be there to-night. They came down to this part of the world year before last.”

Gilbert shot one swift glance in Lewis’s direction.

“How do you know Rawlinson—the surgeon—will be there?”

“Come for three days’ rest. Mrs. R. told me so yesterday.”

Something in the elder man’s tone attracted Lewis’s attention, and the thought of the gossip anent Victor and Rawlinson he had overheard in his wife’s drawing-room just before Diane’s illness flashed in his mind. He was certain that Gilbert had some reason in taking particular notice of the great surgeon’s name, but no more was said, and Gabrielle, entering at that moment, carried Gilbert off to get in a game of billiards before tea.

They drove to Brynwood through a raging gale that roared up the hillside behind the house and sent the rain lashing against the carriage windows, while it drove the clouds at a furious pace across the heavens and checked the speed of the big carriage-horses to a slow trot.

Brynwood, a big bare Georgian house, stood some four miles away, and they were glad to reach it, Marcel growling at having the horses out on such a Walpurgis night, Lewis curious to meet the famous surgeon who was to be present.

He found him a squarely-built, ruddy-complexioned man, dark and clean-shaven, looking a cross between a mellow butler and a very cheery groom; he also found after dinner

that he was considerably interested in the methods of Frontier warfare, and had travelled considerably at one time or another amidst the Border States of the North.

“I’ve a young nephew at Mastuj myself,” he said in the course of conversation, “and I’ve often heard of you from him. His name? Hurst—attached Kashmir Rifles. Do you think all’s quiet now?”

“That’s beyond me to say. Things appear well. Nizam is bolstered up on the throne and really isn’t doing so badly, except of course that his weakness is past praying for. You can’t trust a weak man—and of course he’s the reverse of popular.”

“Yes,” Rawlinson surveyed his cigar-ash thoughtfully. “I knew that. I heard from young Hurst to-day and it seems that Mayhew—you know Mayhew, of course?”

Lewis nodded.

“Intimately. What of him?”

“He seems to have had some request from this precious Mehtar asking that the headquarters of the resident political agent be shifted from Mastuj to Chitrál itself. Here’s the letter. I got it in town before I left.”

He handed the scrawled sheet to Lewis, who read it with close attention, a boy’s letter with no particular eloquence till the last paragraph.

“Nizam is scared for his skin, that’s a sure thing, for Mayhew has just had a request from him asking for our residence to be in Chitrál itself. I can’t help thinking it’s a bit odd, and wondering if there is anything up. One gets confoundedly suspicious, and I hear Sher Afzul is on the ramp again.”

Lewis gave the sheet back, frowning a little; there was no cause for anxiety, yet he felt anxious, a presentiment of coming trouble in his mind. It was odd too that young Hurst seemed troubled also, and, thus considering, his mind

went back to the country that presented the problem—the vast mountains rising snow-capped into the heavens, the lower ramps and shoulders covered with birch and pine forests, the great slopes of loose stones, and the Chitrál river rushing and twisting through the valley fields. In his own opinion it had been a mistake ever to leave Chitrál itself for Mastuj, that wretched mud-walled fort built to catch every wind that blew, and set amongst the dreariest salt marshes. Mastuj was too far to be of real use, and the sixty-six miles of road between it and Chitrál was an appallingly bad hill-track.

If trouble arose—and, despite the fact that all was quiet, he could not rid himself of that odd misgiving that it would—Mastuj was no place of consequence, serving indeed as a link between Gilgit and Chitrál, but ill-kept and in the midst of a bleakly inhospitable region; also Mayhew, British resident there for the present, had only a mere handful of men with him.

So absorbed was Lewis in his thoughts that all present surroundings had faded away, and he sat on totally unconscious of all about him, his cigar gone out, his eyes remote.

Rawlinson, after waiting a while for some comment on the letter, replaced it with a little smile and left him to himself, whereupon Gilbert, who had been watching his opportunity, came round, took a chair next him, and plunged, with no preliminaries, into the matter that was occupying all his thoughts.

Faced by a question so point-blank that it could not be evaded, the surgeon considered his reply carefully. His companion had transgressed etiquette and was obviously aware of the fact, and as obviously cared nothing. After a moment or two he spoke again.

“Of course I know you can't give a certain verdict, but I want to know your own personal opinion. Are you sure in your own mind that it's cancer?”

Gilbert hesitated for a second before the dread word, but his voice was quite steady, and Rawlinson delayed his reply no longer.

"No. I'm not certain," he said. "But I think so. I wish you hadn't asked me, and I have no right to discuss one of my patients with you."

"Not even when that patient happens to be my brother, and he has told me that he has consulted you?"

"No, not even then."

A silence fell between them for a moment or two, then something in Gilbert's expression made the other speak.

"I have one piece of advice to give you. Get your brother out of London. He's burning the candle at both ends in a very natural desire to get the most out of life, but it's a fool's game. If what I fear proves true, we shall have to operate, and it won't give him the best chance either of recovery then or possible cure if he's been playing the devil with his constitution. He wants all the strength he can store up. Why don't you get him down here?"

Gilbert's mouth twisted.

"I'll do my best," he replied laconically, and no more was said.

Ten minutes later, Lewis, entering the drawing-room, made his way to Grizel's side in defiance of all his previous resolutions, met her welcoming smile, and dropped into a chair close by.

"What are you looking so absorbed about?" he asked, whereupon Grizel told him of the suggestion Henriette had made in her letter.

At first he demurred: "I know it would be good for her—but there is Madame Lavel's convenience to be considered, and——"

"And your own," Grizel said quietly. "It is not very pleasant to contemplate parting for several months." Her intuition had told her what his words had only hinted,

and she saw the quick relief in his face at her ready sympathy.

"That's just it," he said, turning a little so that he could face her, "I see so little of the child—and this year is all I have. When I come home next she'll be growing up; I suppose it's selfish . . . I ought to want the best for her but——"

He broke off and met Grizel's comprehending glance.

"That's very easy to understand," she said. "It's just how I should feel with little Derek . . . I don't think I could face it . . . and yet—well there's no need to decide at once, is there? Leave Diane with us for a week or two and then see how she is. I'll write to Henriette to-morrow."

They had no further chance to talk together, for their hostess came across to talk to Grizel, and when later they were driving back to Altonbury, Grizel was silent because she was very tired, and because the troubled thought in her mind would not cease. If Henriette were what she feared, how would Lewis bear it? That he would suffer, and suffer horribly, she was certain, and the warm regard that she already had for him, and that was deepening day by day, made her doubly apprehensive. Opening her eyes after a while, she glanced across to where he sat opposite, his face dimly seen in the light of the moon, and something in the strong, bold features sent an odd little pang through her heart. Her love for Henriette was one of the strongest things in her nature, yet she knew if this were true she would find it hard to forgive her; this was no man to throw lightly aside, no love to be easily discarded.

Half careless, half unconscious, she let her thoughts drift between herself and him. If she had married Lewis, she knew that no man on earth could have shaken her allegiance to him, or marred the great love such union would have brought—and then as suddenly as a physical thing the blow fell, and she saw where her idle dreaming

had led her. Stunned, sick, she shrank back into her corner, and a flying wrack of cloud hiding the moon, the carriage grew too dark to see faces. She heard Gilbert making some remark, but comprehension was past her; she was only conscious of the hammering pulses in brain and throat, and dimly thankful for the gloom that hid her from her companions.

So that was what her friendship was worth? That the meaning of this warmth of happiness at her heart? Was that also the secret of her brooding horror at the thing Henriette had done? The thought stung and lashed like a whip, then passed. There at least she was innocent. She was thankful that the noise of the wind made conversation difficult, thankful that her own obvious fatigue kept the others from attempting to shout above its roar and tumult, and above all she was achingly desirous for the drive to end.

Would they never get home? Would this nightmare be unending? And in the same instant came the unbidden thought that she was wishing away a pleasure that at best could be transient. At least now he was here, close to her, within sound and touch; and he would be gone soon enough, there was no reason to wish the hours to fly faster, and at the realisation of the truth, shame took Grizel for its own, burning throat and brow, tingling in every nerve.

It had come to this then; while condemning Henriette, she had fallen into the same temptation, and only perhaps from lack of opportunity, was preserved from the extreme of similar disaster.

The wild air tore at her as she descended from the carriage a few minutes later, and, in the watery moonlight, visible for a second through the scudding rays of cloud, her face looked ghastly in its pallor.

Disturbed and vaguely apprehensive, Lewis spoke as they entered the house.

“Lady Thurston—are you feeling unwell? You look very white.”

It was the first time he had spoken since that dread moment of revelation, and at the sound of the clear, decisive tones Grizel caught her breath.

“I—am tired,” she said unsteadily, “that’s all. Good night, Gilbert; good night, Marcel. Good night, Mr. Clievedon,” and before any of them could speak again she was gone.

Upstairs in her familiar room, with the firelight playing over its white walls and pleasant chintzes, all was peaceful and inviting, but Grizel, as she undressed with fingers that shook, felt as though she would never be calm again. When she was ready for bed, she stole into the night-nursery where a nightlight burned dimly, and creeping noiselessly to the muslin-draped cot looked down on her baby son for the good-night prayer she never missed.

It was too dusk to see him clearly, but she could make out the bright curls, the curve of a shell-pink cheek, and the dimpled hands curled like the petals of a rose; even as she looked he moved a little, turning his face more fully towards her, and breathing a long, contented sigh from the momentarily-parted lips. He was a baby to bring joy to any mother, but a fierce longing was stirring in Grizel’s heart as she bent over him. If only he were Lewis’s son!

She fought the longing back as she lay tossing on her bed, stifling it with the scorn she poured on herself, and agonising for the sleep that would not come. One moment she lay quiet, nerves exhausted, thought dulled by sheer physical fatigue, the next pain assailed her seemingly twice as strong for its brief quiescence, and every vein in her body seemed changed to fire.

Longing, grief, and shame unutterable had her for their own through the long darkness of the winter night. She had condemned Henriette, she! The reprisal had been

swift, the agony was keen. Dimly she recognised that she must not see Lewis more than she could help, and at the same instant knew with how passionate a longing she would cling to the few remaining hours of his presence.

She was no young girl to mistake a sentimental fascination for the depths of love, and she did not hide from herself the torment that lay in wait for her. All she longed for as the grey dawn crept at last over the land, was for respite, and the continued presence in her life of the man she loved. Two things impossible to achieve.

On Monday Lewis was going back to town, taking the 11.15 train up, and immediately after breakfast he and Lilian agreed that Diane should stay for another fortnight at Altonbury, for the child was already looking much better and less listless. She demurred somewhat when told that her father was leaving without her, but the joys of country freedom and Kiki's society were not to be lightly thrown aside, and she was reconciled when Lewis promised to come and fetch her before Christmas.

Since Saturday he had hardly seen Grizel, and several times he had wondered if she were avoiding him purposely, and the interim had given him plenty of time in which to think out his own affairs. The conclusion that he came to was the only possible one; he must go away and not see her again before he went south with Henriette. That decision made, he felt more at ease, not because he contemplated the future with any false hope of forgetfulness, but because it was the only way of honour, and as such calmed the nerves wearied of the last twenty-four hours' strain.

Grizel's own behaviour helped him in one way, while it hurt him in another. Since Saturday evening he had not had any conversation with her, and not for one instant had they been alone. He knew he ought to be grateful that it was so, but he was not; instead, unreasonable as he knew it to be he felt sore and disappointed, even a little

injured. He wondered if she would drive him to the station, but when the dogcart came round at half-past ten he saw from his window that it was Gilbert who was on the driving seat.

His mouth set as he turned to go down, his hard-won decision not to give himself too much of the pleasure of her society seemed rather unnecessary, and it was with something perilously like a sneer at his own struggles that he went out of the room.

On the stairs he met Diane, and the child linked her arm in his and paced by his side, to the hall where the family had assembled to wish him good-bye. Lilian, Gabrielle, Marcel—one swift glance round assured him Grizel was not present.

An odd little pang of disappointment went through him ; somehow he had not expected her to be full of moods and fancies. This conduct in first treating him as a close and trusted friend, then apparently wearying of his existence, was too perilously like that to which Henriette had accustomed him.

He shook hands, stood for a moment chatting to Lilian and thanking her for his visit, then Diane, still clinging to his hand, went down the three steps to the waiting trap.

“ I don't know where Lady Thurston is, so I must ask you to say good-bye to her for me,” he said, looking back to Lilian from his seat beside Gilbert, and as Blossom wheeled from the door in her peculiarly aggressive manner he heard a delighted chuckle behind him, and looked round to see Diane perched on the back seat.

“ Aren't you surprised, daddy ? ” she cried. “ We did it on purpose, Lady Grizel and I—I'm going to call her that, I like it best— Aren't you surprised ? ”

“ Very ! ” he managed to say, with sufficient amazement in eyes and voice, whereupon Diane chuckled afresh.

“ I'm coming as far as the cross-roads ! ” she announced. “ And Lady Grizel's going to meet me there, and we're

going to have a lovely walk back through the woods. Isn't it jolly? Oh, and Gilbert, why hasn't Blossom got a martingale? She throws her head up enough, doesn't she?"

Lewis listened to Gilbert's explanation, conscious of a sudden relief as though a burden had been lifted from him, and the day's grey skies seemed lighter and the air less heavy and stagnant.

The cross-roads were at the foot of the hill, and as they rounded the turn a slender figure emerged from a gate in the woods and stood still; and seeing it, Lewis's heart seemed to stand still also, and the full force of the calamity that had happened broke upon him. He loved her and he must go away and never let her guess the truth. All his resolutions, all his hopes, even all his fears, fell away from him, leaving nothing but a dull ache of despair, for there was nothing fine or heroic to sustain him, only the monotonous commonplace of everyday life.

Blossom pulled up with a jerk that nearly sent Diane headlong, and Grizel came to the trap's side.

"I hope you were properly impressed by our plot!" she said. "We think we managed it very nicely. You see Gilbert is not returning immediately after seeing you off, so Diane couldn't go all the way. I'm so glad she's staying. She shall come back quite strong."

After one quick glance she did not look at him but gave all her attention to the eager child, and Lewis, jumping down, turned also to her.

"I'm sure she will," he said, "and the plot was quite splendid. Good-bye, sweetheart. Be as good as you can, and write to me often."

He took the child in his arms and, as she clung to him for a long minute, Grizel went to Blossom's side and laid her hand on the mare's neck.

"Her curb's a bit tight, I think," she said. "Shall I let it out a hole, Gilbert?"

To herself she seemed to be playing her part perfectly, yet she was aware Gilbert's keen eyes were studying her rather intently.

"Yes. Do," he said. "Lewis, we must be getting on if you're to catch your train."

Diane's arms tightened in one last hug, then she drew back, and Lewis turned to Grizel, his face hard with the strain he was putting upon himself.

"Good-bye, Lady Thurston," he said, and knew that his voice sounded stiff and unnatural. "I hope this imp won't be too much for you."

Grizel took his outstretched hand, formality in eyes and tone.

"Good-bye," she said. "Give my love to Henriette," and with hardly a farewell glance, drew back and turned to Diane.

The next minute he had resumed his place, and Blossom was off at her speediest pace.

It was rather a sober Diane that walked back through the wintry air, and for a little Grizel felt too sore and injured to cheer her. Lewis's behaviour had hurt her more than she imagined possible, and she was utterly at a loss to account for it. Not till they were more than half-way home did she realise her small companion's unwonted silence, and then reproaching herself resolutely put aside her own feelings and began to talk of all that would be done during the coming fortnight's visit.

CHAPTER XIV

A DAY of fog, melting at dusk into a sooty drizzle not unmixed with rain, was closing down over London, and Lewis, halting on the steps of Brooks's, reconsidered his decision to walk part of the way home. It was certainly a vile afternoon, and the prospect of exercise on the slushy pavements was not tempting.

One of the club servants came up to ask if he should get a cab, and Lewis was just about to assent when a telegraph boy came up the steps, and with one of those unaccountable impulses that sometimes stir humanity, Lewis turned to him.

"Is that for Clievedon?" he asked.

The boy at once held out the orange envelope.

"L. Clievedon—yes, sir," and Lewis slit it open, curiously certain of what it would contain.

Just twenty minutes later he let himself into his house, and made his way to the drawing-room in search of his wife.

Without Diane the house seemed strangely silent, and as he opened the drawing-room door he thought for a moment Henriette must be out, for the room was unlit save for the firelight which leaped and danced about the walls, then he saw her curled up in a corner of the settee, a cigarette between her fingers, and at the piano, Victor, who had evidently been playing to her.

The warm flower-scented room was delightful after the wretchedness of the streets, and for a second Lewis halted, stung a little by the contrast and unwilling to spoil Henriette's very evident delight; but there was no help

for it, no time to spare, and with a little shrug he entered and closed the door.

Either they had been both absorbed in the music, or he had been singularly noiseless, for he saw Henriette jump and Victor swing round; and crossing over to her he spoke as he sat down at her side.

"You're playing—it's too bad to interrupt," he said. "Only I'm afraid I must. Don't go, Victor. It's not private."

Victor had got up from the piano stool; now without speaking he sat down again, and Henriette, throwing her cigarette into the fire, flung round on Lewis.

"Bad news?" she demanded, "Lewis! How horrid! I'm sure it is by your voice and the way you walked—and don't try to soften the blow or prepare me because I hate people who do that. Tell me at once exactly what it is!"

Had he been less occupied with the news he had just received Lewis would have noticed the nervous excitability of her voice, as it was he only thought of the effect that news might have, as in answer to her words, he spoke quite quietly.

"There's trouble brewing over the Border," he said, "my leave has been cancelled, and I must take the next boat East."

He had laid his hand over hers, dreading he knew not what, and at his last words he felt it quiver. Then it was snatched away, and Henriette's voice came slowly through the firelit dusk.

"East? To India? When?"

"The *Iraina* sails on Saturday. I booked my passage coming home from the club." Silence followed his announcement, and the fire, falling somewhat, sent a long tongue of flame up the chimney, illuminating Henriette's face with startling clearness, and at sight of it Lewis hardly checked an exclamation, so strange was her expression. As if he

sensed his host's sudden uneasiness Victor got up from the piano seat and spoke abruptly.

"That's rather startling news. I suppose Gilbert will be treated the same. I'll go round to him now. You'll want to be alone."

Neither Henriette nor Lewis sought to detain him, and when Lewis returned from accompanying him downstairs, Henriette was still sitting just as he had left her as though half-stunned by what she had heard.

"Dear," he went up to her and took her hands, bending over her in anxious tenderness, "you'll not fret, will you? It's——"

His words seemed to awaken her from her reverie, and she looked up at him. Her eyes very large and dark in her pale face.

"You—can't expect me to be pleased," she said, with a little catch in her breath. "Do you—do you really mean it, Lewis? Saturday?"

He nodded, sat down beside her, still keeping her hands in his.

"Yes. It is damned hard luck for both of us, dear. And it means upsetting all the arrangements for Monte, unless you care to find some one else. Perhaps that would be better. Are we dining alone to-night?"

"No. We're dining at the Savoy with the Moseleys."

Lewis checked an inclination to condemn the Moseleys to perdition and endeavoured to plan out the three days of his leave that remained, but Henriette was strangely unresponsive. It was she, however, who voiced the chief difficulty by speaking of Diane.

"I shall go south," she told him later, "it's a pity to upset arrangements, isn't it, and I do so hate an English winter. I suggested sending Diane to Grizel. She told you, didn't she? It is the best possible thing for her. Country air, the companionship of other children, and Grizel's care. Grizel is a born mother!"

"Yes, perhaps it will be best if Lady Thurston is really willing to undertake the responsibility," he said, "but I must see her—Diane, I mean. I'd better wire."

"Wouldn't it be better not to see her again?" Henriette suggested, curling herself up in a corner of the couch. "It'll unsettle her dreadfully. It's bad weather for her to travel up and down to town for a day."

"I should not allow her to do so," Lewis said quietly, "I shall go down for the day myself."

Henriette glanced at him.

"When?"

"Thursday. Gilbert may go with me."

"That will be excellent. I'm glad you are willing to be sensible about her. And . . . and I must go up to dress now, it's getting late."

He watched her go upstairs with an odd disappointment mingling with his relief; after all his news had not seemed to upset her as he had feared it would, and he was glad for her sake, though for his own he felt selfishly that he would have been a little less lonely had she appeared to care a trifle more.

A telephone message from Gilbert a few minutes later confirmed his suspicions that there was serious trouble afoot, and the evening was spent by him in an annoying state of mental irritation.

From the dinner party he went to his club and there met the man he had been wanting to see, Sir John Forrest of the India Office, with the result that he went home exceedingly late, his mind deeply occupied with the problems that had presented themselves.

He went as usual to his study to see if there were any messages or letters, found the lights out and the room in darkness save for the dull red glow of the fire, then paused with his hand on the lamp, for there was a little huddled form in the big arm-chair on the hearth.

For a moment he looked, then moving the lamp so that

its glow should not fall directly on her eyes, he turned it up, and going softly across the room bent over the silent little figure, speaking just above his breath.

“Henriette!”

She stirred but did not wake, and it was evident that she was heavy with exhaustion, for her face was very pale and her eyes shadowed by tears, while in her right hand she still held a crumpled wet handkerchief. She looked such a child in her white satin wrap, with her dark hair curling loosely around her face and shoulders, and the pity of it all took Lewis by the throat. If only she had been capable of responding to the love he had longed to give her! If instead of these undisciplined bursts of passion and equally undisciplined moods of utter indifference to him, or even her own good name and happiness, there had been burning in her nature the flame of a great love! Pity, remorse that the strength of his own heart and soul could never be hers, and a great tenderness for her filling him, he bent down and kissed her.

She woke then with a start, caught her breath, and flung her arms round him.

“Lewis! Oh, Lewis! You’ve come at last—why didn’t you come before? Why——” She broke off sobbing wildly, clinging to him and raising tear-drowned eyes to his, and he took her into his arms and sat down with her in the big chair.

“Henriette, dear, hush! What is the matter? What is it? Don’t cry so, I’m here, holding you. What is the trouble?”

She buried her face on his breast, shaking from head to foot, and it was nearly half an hour later before she grew quiet from exhaustion, and Lewis himself was tired out. Then she spoke chokingly.

“Lewis—don’t go! Oh, don’t go! Resign your post! Tell them you can’t go back! Oh, don’t go, don’t!”

In sheer consternation he looked down at her.

"Dear, I can't do that—you mustn't ask me. It's not possible as you'll see if you think a moment. But why not come with me? You could be in Lahore, and come to the Hills in the spring. I'll do all in my power to make you happy."

He spoke eagerly hoping against hope that she would consent, for he could not rid himself of a feeling of neglect towards her; but even as he talked, he felt her shrink a little away from him. When she answered her voice was steadier.

"No. I can't do that either. I couldn't. I hate the sea, and I hate India. I——"

"With me?"

He spoke impulsively, driving out the image of that other woman, casting all on this die; and at the longing in his voice Henriette looked up and met his eyes.

There was that in them she did not understand, but there was also a very hungry tenderness and, looking, a mist very different from her recent passionate tears crept into her own.

"Oh," she said, hardly above her breath, "you don't understand, Lewis—you don't know. If you did I wonder if you would still ask me to come?"

He was too used to her half-childish mysteries and self-accusing remorse to guess that anything deeper lay beneath now, but he did see a look he had never seen before, and at it something clutched at his heart and it seemed as though Diane's eyes looked at him in appeal.

"I should ask you, whatever I knew," he said. "Don't look like that, dear. You look as if I frightened you."

"No, it isn't you who frighten me," she said slowly, her eyes still searching his face. "What frightens me is here—in my heart."

"Do you want to tell me something and fear to? You needn't be afraid of me, Henriette—don't you know that

yet? Tell me what distresses you. We may not have another opportunity. Tell me, dear."

He tightened his hold on her, and for a moment he saw a wavering in her eyes and her lips parted for speech; then the look changed, the colour crept back to her face and he knew the confidence was lost.

"No, . . . it's nothing. . . . I was only just thinking. My bills. . . . I——"

She was telling a lie and he knew it, but there was no hope now for the truth. Checking a sigh he rose and put her down very gently.

"Then, dear, we must go to bed. It's after one. Bring your bills in the morning. We'll soon dispose of that trouble anyway. Go on while I turn out the lights."

CHAPTER XV

A TELEGRAM from Gilbert and one from Lewis awaited Lilian Lavel when she came in from her morning shopping the next day in company with Grizel, and she read them both aloud, consternation in her voice :

“ ‘ Leave rescinded. Coming down to-night. Sail Saturday. Gilbert.’ ”

“ ‘ Recalled India. May I come for day to-morrow. Clievedon.’ ”

“ Oh, poor little Diane ! Grizel—what can be the matter ? ” Grizel stooped to pick up the muff she had dropped and so for a second did not answer, and Lilian still gazing at the telegrams, repeated her words.

“ Poor little Diane. The child will break her heart.”

The moment's respite was sufficient, however, and Grizel's voice was quite steady as she spoke.

“ Something serious has happened, that is evident,” she said very quietly. “ Better not say anything to Diane. Mr. Clievedon will be the best one to break it to her.”

Lilian nodded.

“ Yes. I must send Kate with an answer. Gilbert won't expect one. Poor dears, it is hard ! And for Lewis too—why his leave isn't properly up till next April.”

But although she had spoken so quietly, it was beyond Grizel to discuss the matter of Lewis's departure, and making some excuse she went up to her room and locked the door.

It frightened her to feel the storm of emotion of which she was now the victim, and her one desire was to be alone,

and fight this passion that shook her. That she should love the husband of another woman, and that woman her friend, sickened her to despair, yet it was true nevertheless, and the knowledge of his speedy departure was anguish. It was useless to condemn herself as wicked—the thing remained untouched by remorse or shame, and she must face it once and for all. Out of doors the rain which had threatened all the morning began to splash against the window-pane, and the rising wind to whistle mournfully around the house; but Grizel sat on staring unseeingly over the gardens to the western fields, sweet lips set, eyes dark with pain. Love had come to her late, and it had come in tragic guise. God had not seen fit to save her from this supreme suffering, but the love itself was not necessarily evil—nay, could not be—since He had sent it as surely as the pain it entailed.

It remained therefore with her, whether this unsought love was a blessing or a curse, a shamed thing feeding on shameful thoughts, or a hidden power upholding and strengthening friendship.

Grizel bent her head down on the arm of the sofa and was very still, fighting temptation in silence; for it came to her now in almost overwhelming force that she should confront Henriette with her knowledge, and demand that Lewis be told the truth.

Could she let him go in ignorance? Ought she to let Henriette continue to deceive him? Was she playing a true friend's part or not?

Over and over again the temptation assailed her, garbed in the form of a righteous scruple. Was she not lending herself to sin by hiding what she knew.

The gong for luncheon startled her, and she rose with the battle still undecided, and went down to find only Marcel present, for both Lilian and Gabrielle were lunching with friends. It relieved her that her younger sister's sharp eyes should not be able to study her, and Marcel's

company was always welcome, for he was possessed of extraordinarily keen and sympathetic insight with regard to those he loved.

The meal was a silent one; Grizel found herself unable to eat, and Marcel did not attempt to make conversation, but after it was ended he took her arm and led her off to the study.

"Come and laze!" he suggested. "We can't go out, it's so wet, and I've a heap of work to do, so you may as well sit by the fire and encourage me by your presence."

It was so like him to ask no questions that she turned impulsively and kissed him.

"Ah, you are a darling, Marcel!" she said, "I envy the girl who marries you. Yes, I'll come. I don't want to work. I just want to think."

Towards half-past four the boy looked up from his books.

"There! I shan't read another word!" he said triumphantly, "and we've had a jolly afternoon, haven't we? Peace is ended now though, here comes Kiki!"

A long-legged vision clad in an oilskin and top boots, stuck a rain-wet face round the door.

"Hullo, you two!" it said. "Where's Diane? Billy has gone to the Meads."

"To the Meads? In this rain?" Grizel's voice was full of amazement. "What in the world for?"

"He had a bet with Manners that he couldn't jump the moat-stream if the sluices were up, so he's gone to try. They're sure to be in this torrent."

"He'll fall in, but luckily it's not much wetter in the moat than out of it just now," Marcel said philosophically. "Don't look worried, Grizel. Even if the sluices are up for flood it's not more than three feet deep."

Thus reassured Grizel was about to answer when someone, bumping into Kiki, sent her nearly headlong, and Diane's voice came apologetically:

“So sorry, Kiki, but I wanted to tell you, cook says Susan’s got her kittens!”

“Oh! Let’s go and see them!” was Kiki’s instant rejoinder, and they fled away, leaving Grizel smiling.

“Did you ever see such a change in a child!” she said, “and although she can’t get out much she has quite a colour.”

Marcel, putting some papers away, nodded.

“I think I shall fall in love with Diane when she’s four years older,” he remarked. “I’m serious. I think she’s the most adorable child I’ve ever met, and she looks a picture always.”

But Grizel’s thoughts were severely practical.

“I know she does, but no one but Henriette would send a child to the country at this time of year with nothing but silk stockings and velvet frocks and furs—and those smart buckled shoes for our roads. She must have some warm rough things like Kiki, and I shall suggest waders too.”

Whereat Marcel laughed and ceased to confide his hopes with regard to the small guest.

The next day the rain had ceased and, despite the lateness of the year, there was a vivid blue sky dappled with white flecks of cloud and a brilliant sun; only in the keenness of the north-east wind and the bareness of tree-branch and hedgerow was the season discernible. Diane, who had been told of her father’s visit, was in a state of great excitement, and about half-past eleven set out in Grizel’s company to meet him.

Grizel battling with her own desires had suggested that Lilian should be the child’s escort, but Lilian was booked for a committee meeting in the town, and Diane was insisting that she should come, so they started, Nanny and the perambulator completing the little cortège.

At the Corn Exchange they parted, Nanny going along North Street to order for cook, and Grizel and Diane

turning southward, the child chattering excitedly and always about her father.

They reached the station just as the train was coming in, and Grizel scanned the windows trying to still the heavy beating of her pulses, a futile task enough as she knew when she caught sight of his bronzed virile face as the train came to a standstill.

Another moment and he was on the platform shaking hands, and his eyes were meeting hers.

"Lady Thurston! How good of you to come. Hullo, sweetheart—why how splendid you look!"

There was real surprise in his voice as he bent to kiss the eager child, and Grizel smiled, well pleased.

"She does look better, certainly," she said, as they made their way out through the draughty little booking hall. "We are walking up, it is such a gorgeous day."

"Yes, isn't it? I didn't expect the joy of the country to-day. Is every one well?"

"Quite. Gilbert hasn't come down with you?"

"No. He's following this afternoon. You see he can stay the night."

They talked of irrelevant matters, being careful not to mention the object of his visit, and Diane chattered all the time, her hand in Lewis's, her face radiant.

Somehow, now that he was here, dread of herself and of him fled from Grizel, and she was only conscious of a serene joy in his presence, a sense of content and rest very different from what she had feared.

As for Lewis, all he knew was that he was once again with the woman he loved, within sight and touch of her, and he thrust all scruples aside determined to enjoy these last few hours of her company.

After luncheon Lilian had arranged that he should have the drawing-room to himself so that he could tell Diane, but instead he asked if he might postpone the evil hour

and tell the child of his approaching departure a little later.

"I don't want her to have too much time to brood," he said. "Let her go for her usual walk. She can come back about four."

"What time is your train?" Lilian asked, pausing on her way upstairs.

"A quarter to seven. Gilbert arrives at five, so we shall just meet."

"Ah, that's all right then. I was going to ask you if you'd think me rude if I don't stay in this afternoon. I had promised to go and see an invalid friend before your telegram came, and I don't like to disappoint her."

"By all means go—surely you know me well enough to waive ceremony!" he said, "I'll have a lazy afternoon. It's a luxury I've not enjoyed for weeks!"

Half an hour later, meeting Grizel in the hall, he threw prudence to the winds.

"Won't you come and laze with me?" he said. "Do! Take pity on me."

For one second she hesitated, then fell into step beside him.

"You don't look much in need of pity!" she said, laughing. "You'll probably go to sleep."

"Sleep?" he echoed, and for a second let his eyes rest on hers; then, afraid she might repent of her decision, opened the drawing-room door and spoke casually.

"This is the most homelike house I know. I always think of it when I am in particularly wild places of the earth."

She passed in, carefully avoiding his eyes, knowing the risk she ran yet feeling suddenly desperate—she must, she would have this one afternoon to look back upon and cherish, and surely she could trust herself for a brief hour.

He followed her across the room, drew up a chair near the fire, and held a cushion ready.

"This is charming of you, Lady Thurston," he said. "Is that right? Will you have a cigarette—and may I?"

He sat down close by, holding out his case, and she took one, and let him light it.

"We are what Marcel would call 'fugging,'" she said. "We ought to be out but——"

"Do you wish we were?"

He spoke deliberately, looking at her with a significance she did not understand, but which made her pulses leap though she replied lightly:

"No, it is nice to 'fug' with the right person. Besides you'll have to be strenuous very soon and you ought to be lazy now if you like."

He laughed, knocked the ash off his cigarette, and sat forward leaning his elbow on his knees.

"Yes. I fancy there's difficult work ahead. I've had an odd idea that trouble was brewing."

Relieved at his change of tone she let her tense muscles relax and watched him.

"So has Gilbert."

"Yes, I know. I can't quite see where it's coming, but it will come all the same. Still—I'm glad of a chance of hard work."

"You've earned your leave."

"Possibly. But I'm glad to be going back—for some things."

"Of course. I envy you your work. It is dull being a woman sometimes; a woman's life is circumscribed by a hundred trivialities, and her mental muscles are apt to grow soft."

"You would like the rough-and-tumble of life?"

"I would like the realities—the things that matter."

He nodded, smoked in silence for a minute or two, then looked at her.

"Do you think work atones for everything? Do you

hold with that common idea that a man divides his life into two neat compartments—work—love, and acts accordingly ? ”

Grizel met his glance full.

“ Doesn’t he ? ” she said.

“ It depends on the woman.”

His thoughts flew, as he spoke, to the bungalow above the Gulmarg Road, and the words in which he had overheard Mayhew voicing his desires.

‘ A brain big enough to risk love, a heart so warm and brave that it will chance a return, a nature so generous that it is above moods—that will just give, and give and give—that’s what is worth having in a woman.’

Clumsily put enough without doubt, yet the memory was insistent. He threw the cigarette-end into the fire, leant forward and frowned.

“ Every man worthy of the name dreams of the ideal woman, the lover who is no less the comrade. He may never realise his ideal, but he retains it nevertheless. Some few of us are lucky—most make a mistake.”

“ And the lucky ones ? ”

“ They are those for whom marriage was created. It’s the others who interest me most.”

For a moment Grizel made no reply, then she looked across at him.

“ Why ? ” she said.

His hands idly touching each other, locked suddenly till the knuckles were white ; his mouth and jaw hardened till his face was like flint. He made no immediate reply ; getting up he leant against the high mantelshelf.

“ Ah, you mustn’t ask me that,” he said, “ I—I can’t answer. I mustn’t—you will never forgive me and I shall never forgive myself—I—I——”

His voice broke without warning ; turning he stood half-back to her, rubbing his open palm slowly up and down along the shelf’s carved edge, his head a little bent, his

figure very rigid. Passion had come upon him with disastrous suddenness, as if some power outside and beyond himself had taken him into its grip. He could not think clearly or attempt to hide his emotion; the utmost he could do was to keep silence.

It was Grizel who spoke at last, all the youth struck out of her face, her voice quite steady but curiously remote.

“No, you are right,” she said. “You must not answer.”

And at that moment he knew that she realised his love for her.

The wind hurled a tattoo of rain against the windows, a coal fell unheeded from the grate and lay smouldering on the blue and white Dutch tiling, and the slow tick of the old bracket clock seemed to grow inordinately loud. He had torn down the friendship between them, he had lost almost all most worth having, but he could still keep silence; no more, only that, was still left him, and with an effort that brought the sweat to his forehead and turned him sick with pain he forced back the passionate words that crowded to his lips, conscious only that over and over again somewhere deep within him one name was forming itself in ceaseless reiteration.

“God, God, God!”

It was hardly a conscious prayer so much as an instinctive movement of the soul—and he knew he must get out of the room, now before his strength gave way utterly. Moving mechanically he turned to the door—and found himself alone. The relief was overpowering; and he sank down in a chair, staring blindly in front of him.

He did not know if it were a few moments or half an hour later when the door opened and Gilbert came in, and for once he did not notice the quick, searching look that the other man gave him before he spoke.

“Hullo, Lewis! All alone?”

“Yes,” Lewis got to his feet, took out his pipe and began filling it. “This is rather unexpected, isn’t it?”

He had himself in hand now, and Gilbert nodded.

"Damnably so. I'm glad we go together, but it's hardly worth it for two months from the financial point of view. Seen the kiddie yet? How does she take it?"

"She doesn't know yet. I shall tell her after tea."

"H'm! And Henriette?"

Lewis was lighting his pipe carefully.

"Henriette is rather upset," he replied. "I have asked her to come, but she can't face it."

To this Gilbert made no comment, but strolling over to the fire, rang the bell and ordered tea, then, with no further questioning, plunged into a recital of his morning's work with regard to supplies for the return.

With every fibre of his being Lewis was longing for yet dreading Grizel's reappearance, and she did not come till after tea had been brought in and Lilian was pouring out; then, Diane clinging to her arm she entered, a trifle paler than usual but quite herself.

"I hope we're not too late," she said, speaking generally. "Diane very kindly came to tell me tea was ready. Ah, Gilbert! You have come then!" She went swiftly across the room to greet him, and when the kiss had been exchanged sat down close by.

"I meant to catch an earlier train," he remarked, "but had to go to the hospital. Lewis knows what that means, don't you, old fellow?"

He turned as he spoke with an apparently casual glance that saw two things; the harsh lines about his friend's mouth, and the very slight trembling of the hand that lay clenched on the arm of the chair, and seeing waited for no answer but went straight on talking to the others, calling down curses on the general slackness of officialdom in general, and his medical board in particular.

One other thing awaited Lewis, and that was the breaking of his news to his daughter, and he shrank from it till the last, then, when every one was chatting he

glanced at Lilian, called the child and took her off to the study.

Once there, the door closed, and Diane looking up at him in some perplexity, he took both her hands in his, speaking quickly.

“Diane, dear, I’ve bad news for you, but try to be brave. There’s trouble on the Border and they’ve recalled me. I’ve to go at once—Saturday.”

It was briefly spoken, but he knew his listener and knew too the false kindness of beating about the bush; watching the child he saw the colour—so newly acquired—fade slowly from her cheeks, saw the eyes darken and widen, the lips quiver distressfully, and seeing felt his own composure suddenly weaken.

With a quick gesture he pulled her down beside him on the couch.

“Diane—don’t cry—don’t. I . . . I can’t bear it——”

He buried his face in the dark curls, crushing her close against him, he was nearly at the end of his tether and he knew it.

A moment later and he felt Diane disengage one arm, then the touch of her fingers on his hair, the tender touch of a woman not a child, and the sound of her voice, shaking a little at first but growing steadier.

“Darling, I . . . I am quite brave. I know you wouldn’t go unless you had to. I’m not going to cry . . . not really. I’m too old now, you know. Only . . . only where am I to stay? It couldn’t be here, I suppose.”

The gallant effort steadied him, and raising his head he kissed her and smiled.

“Would you like to stay here, sweetheart?”

She nodded; only the desperate clinging of her fingers revealing how much her self-control was costing her.

“If I could . . . if mamma would not object.”

“Then you shall. For the winter at all events. Madame Lavel has asked you, and—and Lady Thurston

will mother you in mamma's stead. Will you be happy with her ? ”

She nodded again.

“ Yes. She is a dear. She understands. I . . . I suppose I couldn't come with you, daddy ? ”

“ I'm afraid not just yet, sweetheart. But you shall come out just as soon as the tiresome old school is done with. Perhaps before. Perhaps for a long holiday with me at Gulmarg in the bungalow. You'd like that dear, wouldn't you ? ”

“ And the bluebells on the Srinagar road—oh, daddy, do you remember them ? They were just a carpet under the trees . . . and that dip right down to the river, oh ! ever so steep. May I come next summer ? May I ? ”

“ Perhaps. I'll do my best, dear. And now tell me all the things you want to talk to me about before I go. Put your head on my shoulder—that's right.”

Holding the child close in his arms, listening, directing, caressing, he tried to stifle the pain at his heart, and subdue the passion that set his blood on fire when, despite every effort, his thoughts strayed.

When at last Gilbert's arrival on the scene warned him of the hour's lateness, he felt almost like a man who has been physically ill-used and wearied to utter exhaustion.

Diane, her face still very pale, her lips pressed tightly together to hide their tendency to quiver, clung to his hand as he made his farewells, the expression of almost desperate decision bringing out the likeness between them in a most startling manner.

There was no time for any lingering, Gilbert was going to the station with him, and M. Lavel, who had just arrived from the blast of cold driven in through the open door, bid him good-bye and retreated to the drawing-room, and Marcel hovered in the background watching Diane.

“ Good-bye, sweetheart. God bless you . . . write everything.” Lewis held the child closely for a moment,

his lips on hers, then releasing her he turned to Grizel and held out his hand, and for one second they were alone.

"You will—take care of her, won't you?" he said, half under his breath. "And write to me sometimes. Don't think too badly of me."

Grizel put her hand in his with a firm close grip, and met his look steadily.

"I shall never think badly of you at all," she said, "and I will guard Diane as I do my little Derek. Good-bye."

She spoke quietly, but in her eyes, a little shadowed as if by tears, he saw a look that stirred all the courage in him; and his grip on her hand tightened, a little smile softened his mouth and for one brief moment he looked into her soul, all his own in his eyes; then abruptly he turned away and following Gilbert out into the night pulled the heavy door to after him.

Grizel stood quite still listening as the brougham drove away, her fingers still tingling, her lips smiling a little despite the ache in her throat, then went back to the study and paused on the threshold, for Marcel was there, and Diane, clinging to him, was sobbing in the utter abandonment of a child's despair.

CHAPTER XVI

NESTLED beneath the shelter of stony slopes that form the southern boundary of the Gilgit valley is the official residence of the British Agent, a pleasant gabled house surrounded by orchards and stretches of turf. Running east and west as the valley does, the cold is never excessive, and the summer heats, lasting only four months, can be avoided by a little climbing.

Behind the Agency, barren stony slopes rise sharply for some thousands of feet, but beyond again are the real Hills, towering in majestic splendour of dazzling white against the blue heavens, closing in the valley save for one or two perilous tracks and the only road to India through Kashmir.

This particular January afternoon the last sparse leaves of autumn had long since fluttered raggedly to the ground, and the bare branches of the fruit and willow trees hung motionless in the frosty air.

There had been a slight sprinkling of snow earlier in the day, but the clouds had cleared since noon, and the sun shone in a sky of pale azure, making the frost crystals sparkle like diamonds on the twigs and gabled roof of the Agency house.

Arduous work for several weeks had resulted in Lewis taking a few hours off to go after markhor on the uppermost reaches that were open, in company with Gilbert Lavel who was at Gilgit at the time, and a couple of servants.

A slip on a hidden stone had resulted, however, in wrenching his left wrist enough to put an end to the day's

sport, so it was still but mid-way through the afternoon when they descended once more into the valley and tramped through the fields to the Agency.

Contrary to Lewis's suspicions all had remained quiet since his return, and the winter had closed peacefully down, sealing the passes for six months, and successfully cutting off Gilgit from the rest of the world save for a telegraph line that sometimes worked, and was more generally the plaything of avalanches and snowslides, despite the valiant efforts of the Indian Telegraph Service.

One or two things still gave him moments of uneasiness, however, one being the discovery, a month since, of a strong anti-English party in Chitrál itself whither Mayhew had gone in December, for Mayhew was temperate and rather placid by nature—circumstances which made his report all the more disquieting.

The second matter was one which, months before in Paris, he had mentioned to old M. Lavel, namely, the ambition and restlessness of Umra Khan, the ruler of the buffer state of Jandol and Dir.

The rue Solférino was a far cry from Gilgit, but the discussion then had marked out the true points for uneasiness.

The passion for buffer states which thrives in the heart of British Foreign Offices, London or Indian, is improved upon still more at times by the Indian Frontier Authorities, who erect subordinate buffer states in their turn—which complicates Frontier politics and occasionally demands Frontier blood.

Umra Khan belonged to one of these subordinate buffer states, and having been at first encouraged and then gradually suppressed, was naturally, perhaps, a little sore over his treatment. Then, a British decision arrived at after a certain mission, that the little Khánate of Asmar, formerly taken by him and then seized by the Amir should remain in the latter's care, finally estranged him,

and he became extremely incensed against the British authorities. More incensed than he had even been against the Amir whom he quite naturally detested.

The fact that the British raj had saved him from destruction at the Amir's hands not long previously, and had also protected him from the Mehtars of Chitrál who were desirous of annexing Dir on a pretext of giving it to its late chief, was easily forgotten, and Umra Khan was ready to make trouble.

Lewis, therefore, had had plenty to occupy his mind, and it had resulted in his giving Mayhew precise instructions to summon his escort from Mastuj if trouble seemed imminent; and he had also sent the senior British officer, Sinclair, to repair a very bad stretch of ice-covered road near Yasin so that a reinforcement could in its turn be hurried to Mastuj.

With regard to troops, the Kashmir riflemen gave him a good deal of anxiety as they were badly instructed in musketry despite Sinclair's repeated applications for targets, but the thirty-three men of the 14th Sikhs were a tower of strength as ever. The great drawback was that there were no guns—and guns would have been invaluable should fighting begin. However, he decided that he was probably disquieting himself in vain, and he went to his study as the winter darkness fell and gave his mind to the writing of a report to headquarters.

The Christmas gathering at the Agency had not yet broken up, two of its members being delayed from returning to their respective posts by a particularly violent blizzard on the eastern hills, consequently Lewis found himself with seven guests, six of them British officers, the seventh an elderly Sikh, General Báj Singh, who, while not actually staying at the Agency, was nevertheless the British Agent's guest.

Dinner was at eight, and at a quarter to Lewis emerged from his bedroom and joined the others, who were grouped

round the stove discussing the day's sport and incidentally the chance of the mail-runners getting through.

"No earthly chance," was Gilbert Lavel's verdict, and others of the older men agreed.

"That blizzard on Tuesday would block the track for at least a week."

"Telegrams? There's not a wire left between here and India——"

"You always were an old pessimist——"

"Hullo, Pir Khan? What is it?"

Lewis's Pathan body-servant stood in the doorway, the desultory conversation went on, only Gilbert sauntering across to his friend.

"Messenger from Yasin? What the devil about?" he asked; as the Pathan delivered the message Lewis went to the door.

"Excuse me while I see the man," he said, and quitted the room, to return ten minutes later and close the door carefully.

They all glanced round at the sound as men do when conversation is only a means of killing time, and at the look on his face every man present knew something unforeseen had happened.

Lewis did not keep them waiting.

"A man has been sent from Yasin and I see no reason to discredit his news," he said, "Nizam-ul-Mulk has been accidentally shot by his half-brother, Amir-ul-Mulk, while out hawking."

"What?"

"Accidentally!"

"Good God! Mayhew!"

Lewis turned sharply to the last speaker, Sutton.

"That's it—Mayhew," he said. "Mayhew is in Chitrál with eight Sikhs."

After the first exclamation no one spoke for a little, each man busily turning over the news he had just learnt.

The position was serious in the extreme, for at one blow Amir-ul-Mulk, an ill-conditioned youth, half-brother to Nizam, and with the reputation of a half-wit, had shattered the fabric that had taken the Government two years to build. There was no telling what effect the murder might have on the populace, or how they might regard the solitary English officer in their midst—the anti-English feeling had been strong in December, and Mayhew had mentioned it officially more than once.

Presently Gilbert spoke.

“Fisher is more or less safe at Mastuj, I suppose,” he said, more to himself than to any of the others. “He’s a decent number of troops with him.”

“Yes, if they’re reliable,” Sutton said grimly. “Kashmiris! You know what they’re worth.”

“He’s got some Sikhs too, and anyhow you’d better not let Sinclair hear you say a thing like that!” Gilbert remarked. “He swears by his men.”

“Couldn’t hit a haystack,” grumbled a youthful subaltern, by name Hurst—Rawlinson’s nephew. “Took a squad out last week and——”

“Don’t run down your own men, my son,” Sutton said, some asperity in his tone. “Anyhow, Lavel, Fisher’s considerably nearer us and in a fairly safe district. Also Mastuj Fort is possible at a pinch.”

“He must have heard. Funny he’s not written.”

“Road blocked,” Lewis said briefly, looking up from a note he was scribbling. “Anyway I’ll lose no time.”

He was as good as his word, and reinforcements were hurried five marches distant to Gupis, and hard-riding *estafettes* raced thither with instructions for local men to be despatched to Mastuj both by the usual road and across the hills also—the latter being necessary in case, as Lewis had said, the roads were blocked.

He slept little that night, and all the next day anxiety reigned at the Agency, for no news had come through from

Mayhew, and rumour was rife. At the mess, conversation flagged and finally died down altogether, so acute was the sense of calamity weighing on every one, for Mayhew possessed the affection as well as the respect of his fellow officers and the danger of his position was extreme.

The following evening, however, came relief in the shape of a letter from Chitrál, arriving just as mess was over.

Pir Khan brought it in solemnly, handed it to Lewis and retired, and Lewis glanced at the writing, uttered an exclamation of relief that was almost a shout.

“Mayhew himself! Thank God!”

They all crowded round, dragging their chairs close, eager to hear every word, and Lewis proceeded to read Mayhew's letter aloud, amidst endless exclamations and comments on its contents.

The letter was undisturbed and placid like Mayhew himself, almost casual, as if the writer had little idea of his own danger, if any.

“‘Nizam had gone off hawking to Broz—it's ten miles below Chitrál as some of you fellows know——’” Lewis read. “‘And he'd ridden up a hillock to watch his falcons work; after a bit he'd had enough of it apparently, and was going to ride down when his turban came unfastened, and while one of his servants held his beast he put up both hands to arrange it. Amir—damn him, was just behind with a servant and promptly gave the latter the word. He'd a loaded Snider hidden under his robe, and he pulled it out and shot Nizam through the back.

“‘Nizam fell, shouting for help and tried to fire his revolver, and just as his own men were going to pull down the murderer, what does Amir do but ride forward and say Nizam had been shot by his orders. One servant stayed by Nizam, but the poor devil only lasted a few minutes. Nice brotherly conduct, isn't it? Nizam was a weak fool, but after all he stuck to us pretty well. Of course as luck would have it I was up a ravine shooting,

and equally, of course, had my day's sport spoiled. Again damn Amir. I bolted back and read the instructions you left in event of trouble, and I'm hanged if Amir didn't ask for an interview, and arrived pale and shaky and scared out of his wretched wits at his success.

“ ‘He was horribly frightened and ready for trouble, but my Sikhs behaved gorgeously, and if there'd been a row—well we'd have paid 'em something before we were finished. I've sent for fifty Sikhs from Mastuj, and I told him I couldn't recognise him as Mehtar without reference to you. Hope he lets this epistle through. Of course Nizam was unspeakable, but now it's a question of “out of the frying-pan into the fire”!’ ”

“I wonder if Amir had written to Sher Afzul or to Umra Khan,” Sutton remarked, as Lewis paused, and one or two of the other men joined in discussing the probability. It was generally agreed that such a thing was certain, and conversation became general till every one drifted off to bed eager for the morrow and its possibility of more news.

The next few days passed in anxious uncertainty, then came orders from headquarters in the shape of a letter bidding Lewis take an escort and go to Chitrál to enquire into the state of affairs there, and to commit the Indian Government to nothing whatever.

After the miserable inaction of the last few days definite action was a relief past words, and Lewis made his preparations with all possible speed.

A detachment of the much-discussed Kashmir Rifles, under a young lieutenant of the Gurkhas, named Hewitt, went to Mastuj to take the place of the fifty Sikhs for whom Mayhew had sent, and Captain Sinclair started on the 14th in command of another detachment, for Lewis was determined he would take no risks with a small escort—too much was depending on the whole matter.

The 15th was the day Lewis had arranged to start,

side, his country-bred Agag going delicately as his namesake in the track that just here was wide enough for three to ride abreast. "Don't worry, old chap. These ponies always pitch on their noses, never roll on their sides . . . and they're perfect marvels. You'll get used to it in time. The Plains have made you soft."

"Soft be damned!"

The vigour of the reply was rather weakened by a bad stumble on the pony's part, but after a little he realised that Lewis's words were quite true and that he did get quite used to the method of procedure. The following day, however, the road became even worse, for soft snow hid the ice and rendered falls more frequent. By that time Gilbert felt more sure of himself, and jeered triumphantly when Lewis, just ahead, suddenly dived with his steed into a big drift.

"Hope you're not hurt, though?" he added politely, the first grinning jest over, and Lewis, struggling out of the snow which penetrated everywhere, so powdery fine was it, rose to his feet and glared at his friend.

"Confound you, I'll——" he was beginning, when in its turn Gilbert's pony slid on to its tail, turning its rider and itself a complete somersault. Thus matters were equitably adjusted.

But the march had only its moments of merriment, for the Passes yet lay ahead, and it was far earlier in the year than was customary for them to be open; also there was the growing anxiety about Mayhew, and probably only Lewis, out of all the expedition, felt any satisfaction in the proceedings.

To him, the physical effort and discomfort were welcome insomuch that they left little room for thought—the one enemy he dreaded, so painful had memory become since that December evening in Altonbury. It seemed as though desire fed on absence, as though his very determination to subdue this love for a woman other than his wife, had

given that love double force. Day by day, almost hour by hour in Gilgit he had striven to drive Grizel from his memory, striven to forget the sound of her voice, the look in her eyes—and sometimes in the very midst of his striving had been seized with panic lest he should succeed.

Henriette's conduct with regard to Diane, her tempests of passion and remorse, her supreme and utter selfishness, seemed to him mere nothings beside the treachery of his conduct to her; for Lewis was a man who allowed himself no latitude. For him there was no pleasant dallying in the borderland that lies between thought and action; no indulging in the sin of the mind as opposed to the sin of the body. He held that from indulgence in the one to indulgence in the other is a step so small that it must follow as irrevocably as night follows day, should the opportunity occur. And once given the will, the opportunity is seldom wanting for long.

So the hardships of the marches west were doubly welcome, distracting his mind and exhausting his body, even though their severity was great.

Mastuj, dismal and bleak in the midst of its wind-swept saltpetre swamps, was reached on the 25th of the month, and there Fisher was awaiting them in command of the remnant of his company of Sikhs, the majority having gone on to Mayhew at Chitrál.

A bolt from the blue awaited them, however, for they had hardly entered the Fort, thankful for its melancholy shelter from the bitter winds without, when a messenger arrived with news from Mayhew, stating briefly that Umra Khan had crossed the Lowari Pass from Dir into Chitrál with between 3000 and 4000 men, announcing the fact that while he had no personal quarrel with Chitrál he nevertheless expected Amir-ul-Mulk to join him in a Holy War against certain tribes, or take the consequences.

“Good Lord, the man's mad!” was Sinclair's verdict, as the little group of weary men gathered round the stove

to discuss the latest development of events. "He knows Chitrál is under the suzerainty of Kashmir."

"And doesn't care," Lewis rejoined quietly. "He evidently intends to make a bid for fortune. We were wondering the other night if Amir had written to either Sher Afzul or Umra Khan. I think we're answered."

"Considering how the Chitrális hate the Jandolis, the effect on the country is likely to be lively," Fisher remarked.

"Mayhew's position is worse than ever."

A little reflection proved that, even to the most sanguine, for the Chitrális would be bound to suspect their Mehtar of double-dealing, a stampede from lower Chitrál was beginning, and Mayhew could not conceivably retreat to Mastuj without help.

Supplies, transport, both would be impossible of attainment, and it was very certain that the danger he and his handful of Sikhs would run, either from Umra Khan's men or disaffected Chitrális, would be of the greatest.

Therefore all that remained was for the expedition to push on by double marches to Chitrál.

Lewis decided it was necessary for the main body of the column to halt for one full day in Mastuj before those forced marches began, because transport had to be hunted up, headmen harangued, and the dilapidated Fort patched up—for only fifty men could be left behind to garrison it, and Heaven only knew the strain that might be coming. About midday, however, sending for Gilbert, he had a few minutes' hurried talk with him.

"Sinclair's setting off to-morrow with a hundred men," he said, pausing in the act of scribbling a report. "And if you like to go too—as a combatant—right. I thought you'd like the chance. But the transport is the devil. Porters and animals are as scarce as archangels. I've sent for Hurst to bring another two hundred men up to Ghizr which will please him, and I hope to get started with this

detachment to-morrow. Now you must be off. Good luck, old fellow !”

A close grip of the hand and the two parted, and as the door closed behind Gilbert, Lewis did not for one moment resume his writing, but leant back in his chair staring at the grey damp-mottled wall, eyes remote, lips close set. Sunday afternoon—and the lamps would soon be lighted and the firelight be playing over the quiet room where Grizel and his little daughter sat talking—perhaps of him, Diane’s dark head in close proximity to that golden one he loved.

The thought-picture, vision, or whatever it was, was so vivid that when it faded it took Lewis a moment to realise where he was ; and realising he bent his head, pressing the palms of his hands against his eyes. Oh, God, how it hurt ! And what a traitor he himself was !

CHAPTER XVII

“ THAT beggar reported correctly enough then ? Hoped he'd been merely filled up.”

Sinclair spoke shortly as he rode at Lewis's side, screwing up his eyes as he stared ahead. Lewis nodded.

“ Yes, I hope Mayhew won't try to reach us now. We ought to be at Baranin in another half-hour.”

“ Fisher's dropped back, hasn't he ? ”

“ Yes. His men were all out, so I detached him. He'll follow on with the baggage as quickly as he can. It's getting confoundedly cold.”

Below the passes, in the lowlands, the days were beginning to be already stuffy even though the nights were frozen, and the last march had been terribly severe, to end very shortly after Sinclair's remark with a horrible track less than two feet wide some hundreds of feet above a dully roaring river, and a smoky straw-strewn hut with a supper of equally smoky fowl, tough as indiarubber. Still, the next day would see the column in Chitrál, and Lewis as he stretched out on the dirty straw congratulated himself that so far they had not been attacked, for a messenger had brought them news that morning of a battle at Kila Drosh between Umra Khan's following and the Chitrális, in which the latter had been ignominiously defeated. They had met some of the wounded during the day and seen some pathetic sights ; with his eyes half closed in drowsiness Lewis tried to forget many things, amongst them being the knowledge forced upon him of the populous state of the straw on which he lay.

He woke early, spent a profane fifteen minutes in hunting

to destruction some of the disturbers of his sleep, and after tea boiled in a tin, and some hard biscuits, received a messenger who brought the welcome news that Kila Drosh was being sturdily defended and Mayhew undisturbed at Chitrál.

The column started therefore with light hearts on its last march along an abominable road running for a good distance over a gallery constructed along the face of a cliff—the famous Baitári *pari* as such constructions are called.

As the column drew near leaving the mountain track for the road through the Chitrál valley, a little group of riders were seen leaving the village and Sinclair reining in his pony by Lewis's side pointed it out.

"That's Mayhew, I believe," he said. "It's good to see him safe and sound."

And Mayhew it was, quite cheery despite his recent experiences, and eager to welcome them all, while around him and the four Sikhs with him, various peasants who remembered Lewis's last visit two years before, skir-mished and salaamed, dirty, agile, cheerful.

The greeting between Mayhew and Lewis was brief but heartfelt, then as the close day gave promise of snow every one moved on to get under cover, the officers occupying the upper rooms of Lewis's old residence on the high right bank of the Chitrál river, the men getting in the lower rooms and various outhouses.

There was much to see and hear that evening after mess, and Mayhew announced that Amir-ul-Mulk had excused himself coming to meet the British Agent.

"He funks it," he said grinning cheerfully at Sinclair and Lewis as he sprawled in a chair before the fire. "He thinks if he comes into Chitrál he'll jolly well have to expiate Nizam's murder. But there's trouble afoot, by Gad, and I've had the deuce of a time trying to get supplies."

“Gairat is the point of attack, I suppose?” Fisher remarked, and Mayhew nodded acquiescence.

“Yes. Amir’s there with several hundred men; as the snow is still blocking the hill tracks he ought to be able to hold it easily.”

“Yes—if he wants to,” Lewis said rather dryly.

“Do you?”

Mayhew’s charming grin was tinged with mischief.

“If I did, the matter would be simple.”

“What and where is Gairat?” Gilbert enquired, knocking out his pipe on the heel of his boot. “A fort?”

“A rocky position pierced by the river about sixteen miles down stream. They call ’em ‘darbands’ about here, which means ‘closed doors,’ and a jolly good name it is too. Supposing Amir to be honest, even if Kila Drosh—which is ten miles further—falls, old Umra Khan is still checked. Of course ‘suppose’ is the key of the whole blessed thing!”

They talked a little longer, then by mutual consent sought rest, for they were all very exhausted after the last few days, and the elder men at least, were burdened with anxiety, which the next few days did not lighten, for news came that the nobles with Amir were confidently awaiting Sher Afzul’s arrival, and that Umra Khan had many of the same faction in his camp.

Lewis had little time for private musing during the next few days, for he was convinced that some conspiracy was afoot, and learned by degrees that letters were being suspected and that the Chitrális believed the English were acting in concert with the invader. A visit from Amir-ul-Mulk resulted in nothing but a deepening of his distrust of the young murderer, and the morning after it an exhausted runner brought the news that Kila Drosh had been calmly handed over, stores, rifles and all by the unblushing open order of its commander.

The day was fine though still cold, and Lewis who had

been busy writing orders to Mastuj, went outside on receiving the news, dismissed the messenger and sent for Sinclair.

"There's only one thing to be done in my opinion," he said, as they walked up and down the leafless orchard. "That is, we must get into the Fort at once. What of the supplies? Mayhew has been having great difficulty."

"As the coolies are simply *non est*," Sinclair declared, staring across the sunny snow-sprinkled valley with narrowed eyes, "it remains that the troops must carry in baggage and stores. I quite agree that the sooner we get into the Fort the better, but you'll have a devil of a time doing it. Amir's uncles and cousins and the rest of the precious brood'll do all they can to stop you, short of actual violence."

He proved right, but Lewis held firm, and all that day and well on into the next the soldiers toiled to and fro from the camp to the old Fort, burdened with stores of precious ammunition and equally precious food while Fisher and Sutton carried on what structural repairs were possible in so short a time.

Just before dusk Lewis went the round of the Fort in company with Sinclair, to gain an exact knowledge of the possible defences and to plan his course of action should trouble arise.

There was no regular village of Chitrál, only a number of little hamlets and houses scattered over the valley and among the cultivated lands which stretched some three miles down the valley; and the Fort, usually the residence of the Mehtars, was miserably inadequate for a prolonged defence.

Some eighty yards square, it had walls twenty-five feet high and about eight feet thick, built of rude masonry kept together solely by a cradle-work of longitudinally placed beams; at each corner was a rickety tower some twenty feet higher than the adjoining wall, and the north side, a fifth to guard the waterway.

Unfortunately the entire Fort could be commanded from every point of the compass, for it was built in a hollow in the lower part of the valley and completely surrounded by hills, while various residences were built on higher ground at only a few hundred yards' distance and on the east face a grove of splendid sycamore trees grew close up to the walls.

There was endless cover too from thickly planted gardens all around and any one moving about the Fort's central compound would be clearly visible to any sniper on the hills; while stables and summer-house and outbuildings of all sorts gathered close about the walls.

"I wish to Heaven I could get all these places demolished!" Lewis said irritably, as he surveyed the scene from the roof of the water-tower. "I see Wilson has nearly finished his covered way."

He indicated as he spoke the gate just below where access was given to the river which swept round a great curve some forty yards away; thus giving an explanation of the Fort having ever been built in such an absurd situation.

Sinclair nodded.

"Yes. We shall need it too if pressure comes. If they build sangars across the river they could pot every man who came out for water. Dánin——" he nodded at a village on the opposite bank built a little way up the gently-sloping fields, "commands us to perfection. Anyway we're prepared for the worst. We can't do more. Jove, how wonderful the light is on the snow!"

The sun was just setting below the mighty western range and the eastern slopes just two miles away were flushed to a deep rose, as they lifted their great rounded summits to a sky of purest turquoise in which a slender young crescent moon hung like a silver sickle..

Something in the frosty splendour of colour carried Lewis's thought back in a flash to that afternoon's drive

in the Bois with his wife, Sir Henry Dysart and Grizel; he saw again the trellis-work of leafless branches black against the amber and crimson of the western sky, the frosty blue of the zenith deepening to sapphire in the east; saw his wife's vivid childish face, Dysart's grim good looks and Grizel's fair beauty—and seeing felt as though a hand of ice had gripped his heart and turned his blood to water with the pain of it.

“Good heavens, Clievedon, are you ill?”

Sinclair's concerned voice brought him back to reality with a shock, and the vision faded, leaving the shallow valley and the silence of the great hills around.

“No . . . nothing. I was thinking. Let's get down.”

He was aware that the answer was unsatisfactory and that Sinclair's keen eyes were searching his face narrowly, but the contrast had been too poignant and with hard-set lips and brows contracted he made his way down to the courtyard.

Two days after some nobles and their men who had resented Amir's treachery in handing over Kila Drosh to Umra Khan, rode to Chitrál and asked for troops to help them hold Gairat, and as they were loyal, Lewis decided to agree to their demands, and sent a detachment of Rifles back with them under Sinclair's command.

On February 17th he rode thither himself in company with Amir-ul-Mulk, who was still unrecognised by the Indian Government, but who was at present in the Fort, and matters seemed distinctly better. Amir was silent, but had been told his claims were being laid before the Viceroy, and Lewis felt that the outlook was so much brighter that a peaceful settlement might be effected after all, for Sinclair reported that the defenders of Gairat were confident, and no other storm-cloud visible.

Then, in the midst of a growing security, the blow fell.

Mayhew with a small escort while reconnoitring a good way down the right bank of the river, was fired on by a

party of Umra Khan's men ; and Lewis receiving the news, sent off Wilson post-haste to take military command of the *darband*.

Late at night a mounted messenger was announced, and Pir Khan brought the man into the bare mess-room to report.

His message was brief but sufficiently startling. Sher Afzul was reported to have joined Umra Khan at Kila Drosh.

Hardly had Lewis read Wilson's brief scrawl than a verbal message came from without to the effect that Amir-ul-Mulk had brought the same news ; and for a moment he stared incredulously at the paper. Then he tore the sheet across and flung the pieces in the fire, as Pir Khan conducted the messenger away and the others drew their chairs closer eager for the news.

Lewis's comment was scornful.

"An impossible thing," he said shortly. "Wilson has been misled by some foolish trick of Umra Khan's. Sher Afzul could not get away from Kabul without our having had news of it."

"Impossible things do happen sometimes, sir," Hurst said diffidently, and Gilbert Lavel nodded.

"It does sound incredible and yet——"

But Lewis refused to credit the news for a moment ; he believed Umra Khan to have duped Wilson by a clever trick and Amir's word was worth nothing. He was further encouraged in this belief by the news which came through the following day from Sinclair of large desertions from the Jandol chief's camp, and when Sutton suggested the possibility of these deserters being Chitrális going to welcome Sher Afzul, he declined to give credence to the idea.

There was certainly every reason why he should deem the arrival an impossibility, and he was proportionately astounded when he again received information from Wilson that the chief was present.

Despatches coming through from India about this time bade him send an ultimatum to Umra Khan and authorised him, consistently with his own safety, to help the Chitrális to turn the invader out of the country, whereupon he sent the fateful document and another to Sher Afzul, for it seemed certain, though inexplicable, that he was at Kila Drosh.

Whether the latter's presence was a serious menace or not, Lewis could not quite determine, but it certainly added to the tangle, for it was certain that many of the populace wanted him for their king, and Lewis himself considered—as he had once expressed to old M. Lavel—that he was the only possible Mehtar, being a strong and capable man.

Various trifling affairs, however, interfered with the result that Léwis hoped for in sending him the letter, for instead of Sher Afzul accepting the invitation to come to Chitrál Fort and discuss matters, he sent an envoy saying that the Fort must be evacuated by the English who must return to Mastuj.

Such a message sent by such an envoy—the man was a renowned fighter and made no pretences to diplomacy—could only mean one thing; there was not to be peace, and Lewis who had gone down to Gairat, passed the night of the 27th like the other men, in no very pleasant frame of mind, for it was clear that an attack might be made at any moment.

The weather too, from being cold and fine, turned wet, and during the next two days rain poured down unceasingly, drenching baggage and clothing—and during the day of the return to Chitrál Fort, Lewis learned the comforting news that while the envoy had been with him, men had been sent by Amir-ul-Mulk to break down the road between Chitrál and Mastuj; so that if he had accepted Sher Afzul's terms and evacuated the Fort, he and the whole force would have been massacred at the Baitári *pari*.

On March 2nd, realising that the time had come for decisive action, Lewis held a durbar in the Fort, formally dispossessed Amir-ul-Mulk of his brief authority by reason of his having been led by bad advisers and not being able to maintain control, and placed the only remaining member of the Great Mehtar's family, Shuja-ul-Mulk, a little boy of ten, on the throne in his stead.

At half-past four in the afternoon it was known for certain that Sher Afzul was not far away, and Lewis accordingly sent him a letter stating what had happened and warning him not to make trouble, while Sinclair and the other officers made all final arrangements within the Fort itself.

CHAPTER XVIII

“THE old scoundrel has sent his reply, Clievedon.”

Sinclair's voice roused Lewis from an uneasy doze and he raised himself on his elbow frowning.

“Whom has he sent?” he asked.

“Yádgár Beg. You'll see him?”

“Yes. Explain my inability to receive him properly and bring him in, there's a good fellow.”

Sinclair nodded and departed and Lewis dragged himself further up on the rough pillows; the sense of intense cold that had gripped him on the water-tower had developed into a sharp attack of dysentery and Gilbert had insisted on his keeping in bed. Indeed he was so weak and in such pain that he found it impossible to disobey.

So Yádgár Beg the envoy was ushered into the bedroom, an intelligent influential prince, who, after the usual flowery compliments and by the aid of presents from the British Agent, became friendly enough to tell the truth and admit that the letters he carried from Sher Afzul and Umra Khan were worthless, that those two chiefs were endeavouring to come to terms with each other and that if they succeeded, the former was to press on to attack Chitrál.

Such knowledge was highly valuable, and after the prince had departed, a council of war was held and the advisability of destroying the nearest buildings to the Fort discussed. That they were in a bad way for defence every officer admitted, yet while the faintest chance of peace survived it was decided that the buildings—guest apartments, guardrooms, stables and the like—must not

be touched, so sacred were the royal adjuncts of a Fort that was also the residence of the Mehtars.

In the little dark room he occupied, Lewis lay long awake through the night, gazing wearily into the blackness, wondering what the morrow held for the little garrison, and wondering still more what was happening in England.

Pain and weakness combined to undermine something of his resolution for the time being, and his thoughts reverted persistently to those last fateful weeks of his leave. Henriette's wilful charm, her storms of temper and remorse, the heartless selfishness of her conduct with regard to Diane, her tempestuous fits of passion for himself—ranged themselves against all he knew of Grizel Thurston and made his heart ache anew.

Had he done wrong in agreeing to his wife's desire and leaving Diane—for the winter at least—at Altonbury? Had he taken away a sheet anchor from that wilful child he had married? The thought hurt and worried him in his weakness—yet even so he knew he could not have left Diane to her mother's doubtful care after all Henriette had shown him of herself during the little girl's illness.

And Grizel? Did she give him a thought, did she regret the pleasant days in Paris? Would he hear of her marriage to Dysart, the friend of her girlhood? And there his hands clenched and his muscles stiffened; not that—surely not that. Such a thought was unbearable.

Over and over again through the winter darkness, visions of what might-have-been tormented him, waking and sleeping, dreams of Grizel, the hours he had spent in her company, the sound of her voice, the splendour of her eyes gazing so frankly into his, till he dared not sleep but lay breathing unsteadily, every fibre of his soul longing for the woman he loved and must never see again; swept by storm after storm of helpless pain.

The morning found him hollow-eyed and white-lipped with new lines about his mouth not altogether of physical

pain, and Gilbert glanced at him keenly wondering what hidden suffering of soul had set them there.

"You are not to get up to-day, old fellow," he said, standing beside the rough bed and watching the face of the man he loved, with some anxiety, "If you do, you may have a really bad turn. Here's Sinclair. Give your orders."

Sinclair entering at that moment had a short talk with him, and then departed to order Wilson out for a reconnaissance across the valley to see if Sher Afzul was present with any armed force; while about a quarter to four in the afternoon, Sinclair himself with Hurst and Mayhew took out two hundred of the Kashmir Rifles.

Lewis lay listening to the sound of the retreating footsteps, anxiously wondering if all had been done that was possible to keep away Sher Afzul from the sadly-depleted garrison of the Fort, and by and by, anxiety becoming too strong, he got out of bed, dragged on a few clothes and feeling exceedingly shaky sent for his horse.

He overtook Wilson a mile further, found he had detached fifty Sepoys to hold the serai-bazaar and had sent Hurst forward up some slopes on the right to confront some men who had been seen in that direction.

"See that outlet through the valley boundary?" Wilson pointed along it, "I spotted a hundred and fifty or so of the blighters scrambling about there. Sinclair's got the main body of the men covering your old house."

"Then as all is quiet we'll find out what we can," Lewis said. "That they're in ambush somewhere I'm certain. Stop that priest, Wilson, and bring him to me."

A travelling priest ambling along the road on a small pony came into sight and was hailed up to be questioned, but beyond the fact that he seemed desperately ill at ease and evidently wanted to leave the Chitrál valley behind him as quickly as possible, no information could be obtained. Yet Lewis and Sinclair and the rest were all certain an

attack was planned for this day, and now Lewis scanned the fields and houses with anxiety. Presently he drew close to Wilson and signed to a spot where on the right bank of the river about a mile away a series of little hillocks hid a narrow track.

"I believe Sher Afzul is hidden there," he said, "I saw a man ride out and back just now, and that peasant we stopped a moment since swears there are three or four hundred armed men there."

The peasant in question had also described the men Hurst was watching as frightened neighbours of his own who had fled at the sight of armed men. General Baj Singh riding up at this minute echoed the same opinion and Lewis felt half inclined to agree.

"It's not too late for a further reconnoissance," he said, and Sinclair ordered Wilson to push his men forward to a house on a lower level.

"You are to hold yourself at Wilson's service," Lewis said to Mayhew. "And here is a note I want him to send on to Hurst. Read it."

The note in question was a curt order to the effect that Hurst was to fire one shot over the heads of the men he was watching, when, if they proved to be enemies, they were to be volleyed at and driven back. Lewis glanced at Mayhew.

"Is that clear in case you have to convey it by signal?"

"Quite clear."

"Good. Go now then."

Mayhew rode off at top speed and a few moments later as Lewis going forward joined Wilson, a single shot rang out from Hurst's party, followed by a volley from the further side of the ravine, while at the same time a fire opened from the village of Dánin on to the Fort itself.

Sinclair meanwhile was advancing further down the valley and seeing a section of the enemy ahead, opened fire on them, while taking as much cover for his own men

as possible, and more firing was going on from the hillside where Hurst was engaged.

The dusk was falling, the shooting of the enemy was remarkably accurate, and Lewis who was with Wilson along the top of some high ground, began to look for Hurst to drive down the enemy from the hillside above and support their own contingent, the position of which was becoming distinctly awkward. But there was no sign of Hurst, and small groups of the enemy began to get around the left flank and enfilade from the direction of the river, and Lewis seeing Sinclair coming up drew Wilson's attention to him; whereupon Wilson shouted a question and Sinclair shouted back that he was trying to get his supports up to charge the oncoming enemy.

"I'll go and help," Wilson ejaculated, and Lewis getting together the men scattered around, watched him; coming back, however, he had to climb over a broken wall, and as he paused on the top to use his field-glasses Lewis saw him pitch forward, clutch at the stones and roll to the ground.

He was getting up as Lewis reached him, his mouth twisted with pain, even as his men and Sinclair's charged to the attack.

"They've got me in the knee," he said, pulling himself to a stone, "I can get on in a minute though. Where the devil is Hurst?"

He might well ask, for Sinclair was bringing his men back, a good many wounded among them.

"We can't push it home," he said bitterly, "Baj Singh is dead and we're losing men heavily. Send Fisher a message to bring out his Sikhs to cover our retreat."

Despite the fact that his face was grey with pain, Wilson sitting on a boulder began scribbling the message, but when the retrograde movement began the enemy came forward with yells and threats, offering little mark, but steadily killing.

There was every chance of the retreat developing into a panic, and as Wilson and Sinclair—the former hobbling along with the aid of a Gurkha—progressed, Lewis with his little following of two or three native officers and men, retreated to a small orchard full of low-growing apple trees, which was protected for the men by a low wall, but where the horses were so exposed that Lewis had them trotted sharply off.

When the gathering dusk made it more possible to move they crept along by the wall, till on the low spur opposite whither Hurst had disappeared a small group of men were seen, and just as rifles were raised and sighted, a sharp cry of "Stop!" was heard, and Lewis saw Mayhew's lanky form detach itself from the group, and beyond it a still figure stretched out that looked very like Hurst himself.

Wheeling round he sent one of his followers to find Lavel, and crouching like the rest under the wall's inadequate shelter, watched the little gathering keeping back a section of the enemy who were firing amidst the trees.

He was just beginning to believe that the check was complete enough for them to get away, when one of the men with a yell drew his attention to a body of Sepoys racing in from the left hotly pursued by an apparently big number of the enemy.

This was enough for the little group of timid Kashmiris and they promptly bolted, and Lewis seeing his one chance to stop them was interception, ran out into the open, the bullets "thut-thutting" round him, the air rent with yells and curses.

On came the flying Sepoys, on the pursuing enemy, and a spasm of pain, so violent that it brought the sweat to his face, took Lewis and he sank down on a stone, doubled up and helpless.

For a moment even the noise and the sense of appalling danger faded, swallowed up in sheer physical agony, then

he became conscious that a strong arm was around him, and he opened his eyes to see one of the Gilgit Rajahs, who half-led, half-carried him off till they met a groom bringing up his pony in the face of the fire.

"Put me up——" Lewis gasped, catching at the stirrup, for although the worst of the pain had subsided he was faint from its effect, and he was hoisted into the saddle as carefully as might be, no easy task, for the pony was half-maddened by fright.

What happened next was dim enough afterwards to Lewis, but he was vaguely aware of getting all the men he could together and hustling them into a small enclosure a few hundred yards further on, just as Sinclair and Wilson struggled up with the remnants of their own parties.

"We must get another message through to Fisher to bring his men out, but Heaven knows who'll take it," Wilson said, reeling against the wall and trying to rest his knee. "And it's no good staying here, they'll overwhelm us twenty to one."

"I'll go," Lewis said, and before any of them could stop him wheeled the terrified horse round and let him go.

From thence onward the ride was a nightmare of twisting pain, thudding bullets and the flashes of some of the more ancient weapons, for the horse charged straight for the Fort, clearing walls and drops in his tremendous stride, carrying his wellnigh helpless rider through the enemy's midst, maddened and uncontrollable.

It was that very madness of the poor beast's terror that saved Lewis, for his speed was terrific, carrying his rider almost miraculously past the snipers, and little out-lying groups of Chitrális to the very Fort itself, where all was in confusion, Fisher having already left with his Sikhs.

Lewis slid off the trembling animal, reeling against the hot grey neck, and for a moment the world swam; then his will reasserting itself conquered something of the physical weakness, and pulling himself together he issued

his orders, for already the foremost of the retreating troops were at the gates. It was not long before an informal roll call showed that amongst the missing were Lavel and Hurst, and Lewis hardly checked a groan—Lavel—Gilbert—he shut his eyes for a moment, a spasm of pain not wholly physical, seizing him; but there was no time for private grief, the Fort had to be defended, and the wounded attended to.

Wilson was despatched to hospital, the Sikhs to watch the main gate and river-front, the other injured men to be examined, and the somewhat demoralised Kashmiris to be "bedded down" for a few hours' rest.

It was dark now, and Lewis stumbling in his room found his flask, emptied it at a draught, and went back to the room that was to be a hospital, to find Wilson endeavouring to cut the breeches away from his injured knee and sobbing with pain.

In Gilbert's absence Lewis went to help him, and after a few minutes a bad wound was laid bare, testifying to a shattered knee-cap, with dirt and bits of cloth driven in and blood drying and clotting about the torn muscles.

"I—I suppose I'd better—wash it——" Wilson gasped, recovering himself somewhat as the need for movement ceased for the moment, "Good lord—it hurts!"

He managed a wry grin at Lewis, then suddenly uttered a yell, for the elder man had picked up one of the bottles on the shelf and was drenching the wound with its contents.

"Carbolic acid and water, old fellow, I'm horribly sorry—stick it for God's sake or you'll get blood poisoning."

Lewis hated to give pain, and the anguish such rough treatment gave Wilson was poignant, yet it was no time for half-measures, and when the knee was finally swathed in very creditable bandages, Wilson managed to grip his hand for a moment and force a: "I know. Thanks, Clievedon," from between his clenched teeth.

As Lewis left him, Pir Khan, a dried streak of blood down his cheek testifying to a sword cut, came up almost at a run, his usual dignity quite lost as he gasped out his news.

“Lavel Sahib and Hurst Sahib at the garden gate. Heaven-born . . . in very truth. . . Hurst Sahib is dying !”

Lewis wasted no time in questioning the man, Pir Khan's word was to be believed, and a moment later with two or three of the others, he was at the gate to find, as it was cautiously opened, Gilbert, exhausted and dishevelled, a blood-stained handkerchief round his head with Hurst in his arms.

One glance at the boy was enough, and eager, kindly hands bore him into safety, Gilbert following unsteadily, exhausted by the fierce struggle through which he had gone.

As they laid Hurst down in the room henceforth to be devoted to hospital uses, he opened his eyes and seeing Lewis spoke feebly :

“I say . . . sir . . . Lavel saved me. Lavel . . . risked everything . . . carried me in . . . never left me even when they wounded him. See he . . . gets proper notice . . . thank——”

He broke off, too weak to say more, and while his wounds were being dressed, Lewis went off to write despatches, for a messenger must somehow be got through to Mastuj. Later he thanked Gilbert formally in the name of the whole expedition for his gallant conduct with regard to Hurst, and then spent the midnight hours by the dying man's side while Lavel got some rest.

It was a strange night, this first of the siege, and Lewis's thoughts roamed far as he snatched short moments of sleep, or sat watching the white young face on the pillow near by, its pallor accentuated by the feeble illumination of a tiny oil lamp.

Hurst might live till morning, but already sleep was passing into coma, and there was nothing more to be done ; watching him Lewis wondered dully why he was to be pitied, then scorning himself for cowardice forced his thoughts to other matters than the personal, and tried to plan out a course of action for the forthcoming days.

CHAPTER XIX

THE old saying: "As the days lengthen so the cold strengthens" was very true this year, and Grizel, coming in from an afternoon walk one day early in March, was not sorry to get to a fire, for, despite briskness of pace, the icy wind had penetrated to her fingers, even through fur gloves, and her face tingled and ached with the cold.

Diane was still at Altonbury, going to school with Kiki and enjoying every moment of her new life with healthy childish enjoyment, save when the longing for her father grew too great to be borne. Then she became rather silent and would prefer to be curled up with a book on the window-seat sooner than be playing wild games with Kiki or Billy, and only Marcel penetrated the unchildlike reserve which at such times enfolded her. To him she was as frank as to Lewis himself, and Grizel watched half-amusedly, half-tenderly her brother's answering devotion to the child.

It was not that Diane showed her no affection, on the contrary the child's love was unmistakably manifested in a hundred ways, but some link seemed to bind her to Marcel that was lacking in her other relations with those around her, and certainly Marcel himself responded as warmly.

There was a threatening of snow this particular day, and Grizel, being so cold, had hurried home for a cup of tea before calling, as she intended, for her father at the School of Music, and after running up to the big cheery nursery to see if the children were in and how her small son was, went to the drawing-room. One lamp was lit, throwing its soft shell-pink light over the tea-table, and

there, leaning back in a low chair, the pallor of his face accentuated by the black cushion against which his head rested, was Victor, eyes closed, thin hands lying relaxed along the arms of his chair.

In the brief moment that elapsed between the opening of the door and his consciousness of her entrance, she had time to be conscious of a shock at his appearance, which did not lessen as he opened his eyes, for in their depths was a strained, haunted look, as though fear dogged him through his days.

She was too wise, however, to let him see the dismay she felt, but going quickly over to prevent him rising, bent and kissed his cheek.

"My dear, what a delightful surprise! You came by the four o'clock train? I did not even know you were in England."

"Yes. I crossed last night, and thought I'd come down here for the Sunday."

"You can't stay longer?"

"No, I only came over on business. My new play is to be put up next week, and the dress rehearsal is on Wednesday. I want you to come for it. Grandpapa has written."

He took a note in M. Lavel's delicate handwriting from his pocket and handed it to her, three lines asking her to spend a few days in Paris if her engagements permitted.

"You'll come?" Victor said, as she refolded it.

For a moment she hesitated. Little Derek had a slight cold, and she did not quite like leaving him, but a glance at her brother's face decided her.

"Yes. I shall look forward to it. Are you very anxious?"

He smiled a little, watching the maid idly, as she brought in the tea.

"Not very. I'm tolerably certain of the storm it will

raise, so I do not worry. By the way, have you heard from Gilbert lately?"

"No. They were at Gilgit when I heard. I did not get the letter till the second of February, and we have had no word since. I suppose the passes are blocked. He said the snowfall was exceptionally heavy."

"Yes. I suppose so."

Victor's tone was listless, he drank one cup of tea, refused to eat anything, and relapsed into silence till Marcel entered followed by Gabrielle.

There was much surprise at his appearance, and after greetings had been exchanged, Gabrielle exclaimed bluntly at his pallor and general look of exhaustion and illness.

"You look horribly seedy!" she said, with the frankness of her age. "What have you been up to, Victor? Have you seen a doctor?"

"Seen a doctor?" he echoed irritably—there had never been much sympathy between Gabrielle and himself. "Why should I? Don't be so imaginative."

"I'm not! You are ill, I don't care what you say! Why your eyes are black underneath, and you are thinner and the lines round your mouth were never there before."

Victor's volcanic bursts of passion were known and dreaded, and Marcel saw Gabrielle's words were as a match to gunpowder. Quite deliberately he knocked over his teacup, and the hot liquid deluged her ankle.

"Marcel! You idiot!" she cried, Victor's looks forgotten, "you might have scalded me dreadfully, and you've soaked me anyway. I shall have to go and change my stockings."

"I'm awfully sorry!" he exclaimed penitently, mopping up the tea. "It was very clumsy," but he carefully avoided meeting his brother's eyes, and in another moment Gabrielle had departed to remedy the damage.

“Are you going out again?” he asked, as Grizel rose. “It’s frightfully cold.”

“Yes, I am going to walk down to the School of Music. Will you come?”

Marcel hesitated, then:

“I don’t think so,” he said, “I promised Diane to help her with her arithmetic, and it will make it late and spoil her evening if I go out now.”

“Your devotion is extraordinary,” Victor remarked, closing his eyes and frowning a little, “you’ll spoil that child.”

“She can do with a little spoiling,” Marcel replied, a hint of indignation in his voice, “her mother doesn’t trouble to do it.”

Involuntarily Grizel glanced at Victor; he did not show any sign of annoyance at this criticism of Henriette, save by a slight deepening of the line between his dark brows.

“Henriette is wise enough to object to the modern *enfant terrible*,” he said.

“Selfish enough to object to the child’s giving her any trouble, you mean!” Marcel flashed out, “I don’t believe Henriette would care if the child died!”

For Marcel to show such temper was almost incredible. Grizel stared, and Victor opened his eyes and looked at him for a moment in surprise before his anger rose. Then, his whole face seemed to harden and grow keener, and his thin arched nostrils dilated.

“How dare you speak so?” he said hardly above his breath, and speaking in French as he was always apt to do in moments of strong emotion. “What do you know of Henriette’s feeling or character? What do you care if she is miserable or happy, that you should presume to judge? What are you to do with her?”

Grizel on the way to the door stopped with paling face and fear in her eyes, and Marcel, turning, looked his brother in the face, amazement and something else in his gaze.

"I think I might ask you that question," he said, and in the silence that followed the words Grizel could hear the hurried throbbing of her pulses.

Marcel's reply had been so unexpected, the whole episode had been so unlooked for that she felt powerless for the moment to stave off the disclosure she felt must follow. She need not have feared.

For a moment the two brothers faced one another, Marcel's blue eyes grave, steady, accusing. Victor's hard and cold as steel. Then he rose from his chair, shrugged his shoulders, and taking out a slender gold cigarette-case, proceeded to light a cigarette. As he threw the match in the fire he spoke evenly.

"It would be as well if you wish to repeat that question to prepare yourself for the answer," he said, and looking up from the glowing point of light gave him one significant glance. "Before Grizel it is impossible. You understand?"

Marcel's steady look did not waver.

"Perfectly," he said, then crossing the room opened the door for his sister to pass into the hall.

Daylight had gone completely by now, and not even in the west was there a hint of sunset, but a moon approaching the full was high in the sapphire heavens, flooding the world with the extraordinary brilliant radiance of frost.

Although there was no wind it was certainly exceptionally cold, and Grizel walked fast, her footsteps ringing sharply on the iron-hard road trying to banish thought by physical action, forcing herself to appreciate the beauty of the night, the fir trees on the opposite side of the road standing up so sharply pointed against the starry heavens, and the white fire of moonlight making the roofs and road glisten. The frosty air made her think of that walk to the Gare St. Lazare with Sir Henry Dysart, but the cold was far more intense to-night, and there had been no moon that evening in Paris. Paris—the very name brought a

sense of homesickness, of longing for the city, and the land she loved best ; desire most of all for her grandfather's presence, and the tenderness that had never failed her. She was glad she was going next week, glad Victor was leaving London, and that his work would keep him busy for a while out of England ; Marcel's words had shocked her more than she knew, though she tried hard to read into them nothing more significant than an angry boy's retort. But it was not Marcel's way to be angry and her old fears, somewhat lulled these last few months, re-awakened stronger than before.

It seemed incredible that any one so unsuspecting as Marcel could have knowledge of what she herself feared, yet his words seemed to point to it and if so—a collision with a tall bearded man at the corner of the road startled her back to her surroundings, and with a sigh of relief she caught her father's arm.

"You are late," M. Jean remarked, "I waited ten minutes," but he did not seem in any way displeased, and tucked her hand close against his side.

"I know. I was detained—a thousand pardons!" M. Jean glanced at the fair face beside him and smiled ; of all his children, this, his eldest daughter, so like the wife he had adored, was nearest his heart.

"It is nothing. I want to order a score at Dennison's, and we have time before six. Let us go down to them."

They turned down Windhill, Grizel not talking, but insensibly soothed by his presence, for though M. Lavel was the one being who had her inmost confidence, and for whom she had the most tender love, she loved her fiery, clever father too with a very deep affection, albeit it had more the character of friendship than filial devotion.

M. Jean Lavel did not speak at all till he had given his order at the local musicseller's, then his first words were not to his daughter, but to a fat, jaunty pupil who had

entered while his back was turned, and now tried to avoid him guiltily.

“Mademoiselle! Have you any disease of your throat this night?”

Mademoiselle gave up the attempt to escape and slunk forward—her movement was nothing else.

“No, Monsieur.”

“Indeed? I wonder at it, since you keep all the pure air from your skin.”

He paused terribly, gazing at the high fur collar clasped about his luckless pupil’s plump throat.

“I—it—the night is so cold!” the culprit stammered, all the jauntiness gone from her like air from a pricked balloon.

“Most certainly it is cold! Cold and healthy. Strengthening instead of weakening. Bah! You are *imbécile*, you who keep all the good clean life away with death-traps like this!”—he touched the fur with the tip of one angry finger—“Death-traps! Never let me speak again or I teach you never again also.”

He glared down from his majestic height and the discomfited one fled; whereupon, turning to Grizel, he spoke quite tranquilly.

“She has a voice in a thousand—and I will not have it weakened.”

“You were dreadfully alarming!” Grizel responded, with a little smile, as he held the door for her to pass out. “Will she obey?”

M. Jean smiled also, a little twinkle showed in his black eyes.

“*Mais certainement*,” he murmured, and they emerged into the moonlit street.

From the music shop, a main road at the northernmost end of North Street was almost as near a way home as Windhill, and they took it by mutual consent, each pleased with the other’s company.

As they neared the house, however, M. Jean spoke with sudden gravity.

"I have news from London," he said, "of trouble in the north. Carwood——" he mentioned a high official in the India Office, who was a great personal friend—"wrote me this evening. He had had a telegram this morning. If you come to my room you shall see it."

A pang of anxiety shot through Grizel, but as they were just home, she asked no questions, and following her father into his own study, there read the scrawled epistle.

"The mail comes in to-morrow. We should hear from Gilbert," he said. "Say nothing to-night. I have arranged that I hear immediately."

Grizel signed assent, then was about to leave him when he stopped her by a sign.

"Has Victor come?"

"Yes," she said, rather surprised. "How did you know?"

"He sent me a telegram. No one else is here?"

"No. No one else."

She left him then, remembering afterwards that she had not mentioned her intention to go to Paris the next week. Her room was empty, but a letter in Henriette's handwriting lay on her dressing-table with the Paris postmark, and opening it she saw the heading: "Hôtel de Lille et d'Albion."

Hurriedly she read it through, a short hastily written letter saying the writer was on her way to visit some friends in Italy, but intended staying in Paris until after Wednesday as Victor had told her the full rehearsal of his new play at the Renaissance Theatre was on that day. Grizel was of course coming? She had done herself the honour of calling upon M. Lavel the previous afternoon, and had found him well and in excellent spirits.

Grizel put the letter away with the sense of foreboding her father's news had aroused deepening, but for the

moment there remained nothing to do but be silent, so striving to put worry aside, she went to the schoolroom as the most likely place of oblivion. The lamp there was lighted, and the three children grouped round the light with papers and pencils, evidently deep in some game, and as Grizel entered Kiki, sprawling half across the table, took up her paper and read its contents proudly.

“ Mary had a little lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow ;
She took it to Chicago—
And now look at the damned thing.”

“ Ooh ! ”

“ Kiki ! ”

Billy's squawk of admiration coincided with Diane's rather shocked utterance, and Grizel, preserving her gravity with something of an effort, closed the door and went forward.

“ Kiki, where in the world did you hear that ? ”

Kiki, her eyes dancing wickedly, looked up with a grin.

“ Gilbert told it me.”

“ You're not to use that word any more, whether Gilbert told you or not,” Grizel remarked, giving the fair mane an affectionate pat. “ Mr. Clievedon won't let Diane stay here if you teach her things of that sort.”

Diane, curled up in a chair with both slim hands propping up her chin, spoke reflectively.

“ Daddy has taught me some rather odd things himself sometimes. To-morrow's mail day.”

Grizel thought of her father's remark, but merely assented and Diane went on :

“ I'd hate to go back to Sloane Street. Fact I wouldn't.”

“ You'd have to go if your mother sent for you,” Billy exclaimed, and Diane laughed.

“ She won't. It's ever so much less trouble for her for me to be here. Isn't it time for baby's bath yet, Lady Grizel ? ”

"Nurse has given it, dear. I was obliged to go out."

Her news was received with melancholy, Diane loving the small Derek devotedly, but Kiki changed the current of her thoughts by throwing herself on the rug by her sister's chair, and demanding a story.

"One of those jolly Saga ones, or the King you were going to tell us about," she decided, and Grizel allowed herself to be persuaded into relating something of the life history of the great Shan Jehan.

The three children sprawling round listened with wide eyes, but as Grizel ended, Billy glanced at Diane.

"Di's crying!" he exclaimed.

"I'm not!" Diane retorted, but her voice was shaky and she kept her head down so that her dark curls hid her face. "Only—only I don't like to think of him lying there in that room all those years just waiting when he loved her so. Waiting's so hard!"

"He could see her tomb, though, so I expect it didn't seem so bad as it might have done," Kiki said wisely.

"Nineteen years, was it?"

"It was like Jacob's Rachel p'raps. And anyway he could always *remember*."

Grizel looked down at the child's face so unusually thoughtful in expression, and the dull ache at her heart deepened.

"Yes, he could always remember," she said very softly.

"That would help the waiting."

"I think it would make it worse!" Billy asserted, fighting, boylike, against any approach to sentiment. "If I was a prisoner in a beastly room, in a palace with only one small window, I shouldn't want it looking on a tomb. I'd want to see something going on—tigers p'raps."

"He'd seen tigers and things all his life till *she* died," Kiki said, a hint of fierceness in her voice. "He didn't care about them any more. He wanted to think about *her*, and look forward to seeing her in Heaven. If you've

got nothing to do but think, you'd better watch something that comforts you, not things that just make you mad 'cause you can't do them any more. He loved her, you see—really and truly."

There was a moment's silence after such an onslaught, then Diane spoke dreamily, half to herself.

"I think that's how daddy would love," she said: "He'd never forget. *I know.*" The queer little ache at Grizel's heart that had never wholly left it since that stormy November night, made her look down half-questioningly at Diane, even as Billy put a blunt question.

"How can he go off to India then and leave your mother?"

"Because he isn't in love with mamma like that," Diane explained, before Grizel could check her. "You can't be in love in the same way with mamma—she's—she's so different from anybody else. I said that's how he *would* love."

"Diane, dear, I think he wouldn't quite like so personal a discussion," Grizel said gently, and the child looked up quickly.

"I wasn't meaning to be disloyal!" she said, with hasty dismay, "I was only thinking things out."

"I know. We've got rather off our subject, haven't we? I've a beautiful snapshot I took from the inside of Shan Jehan's cell window, and you can see just what he looked at. I'll bring it down presently."

"Thank you."

Billy growing restless sauntered off to feed his puppy out in the stables, before inexorable laws brought bed-time near, but the other two children sat on, and presently Kiki spoke; the history of the great Mogul Emperor had appealed powerfully to her imagination.

"I hope I shall fall in love like that," she said, "I should like my husband to want to look at my tomb like Shan Jehan did, if he was imprisoned, shouldn't you, Diane?"

Diane nodded, but did not remove her gaze from the glowing heart of the fire.

"Yes, but I don't think many married people love like that, do they, Lady Grizel? They just seem ordinary generally."

"Grandpapa did, didn't he, Grizel?" Kiki said, looking up for a moment.

Grizel's thoughts flew to the study at the Rue Solférino and the miniature that night or day never left M. Lavel's side, and the undying romance and tenderness for his dead young wife that had supported her grandfather through the years since her death.

"Yes, dear," she said, half to herself. "He loved like that—loves still. Love, real love, doesn't die, you know."

"I think it would be very hard to remember that though," Kiki murmured. "And it's always the people you love best go, isn't it? That would be the worst of being like he was. The years would be so long waiting . . . just waiting . . . and sometimes he'd be afraid, wouldn't he? It would be so—so silent. He'd want to know, to hear, just once, and then it would be so easy to be patient. I think the silence would be the worst of all."

The silence of death . . . the impenetrable calm against which souls dash themselves in vain, agonising, imploring for some sign from the Land that is very far off, when not even the wildest prayer of those left behind can win an answer from the loved souls that have never failed them before—the souls that have passed on behind the Veil of God—surely therein lies punishment and expiation.

Suddenly, for the first time for half an hour, Diane moved, and tossing back her hair, lifted a pale wide-eyed face.

"If anything happened to daddy I couldn't bear it," she said quite simply, "it wouldn't be any good even trying to."

“That’s wicked!”

“That wouldn’t make any difference at all. There are some things one cannot bear, aren’t there, Lady Grizel? If you loved daddy and he loved you, like Shan Jehan did, could you bear it if he—he died?”

And Grizel answered, white-lipped: “No, Diane.”

CHAPTER XX

THE following day came the Indian mails, and Gilbert's letter from Gilgit, telling of the start of the Chitrál Expedition, a mail late, detained by the snows banked on the Passes.

The children were told nothing of the anxiety that descended like a cloud upon their elders, but Grizel, bearing a double burden, kept Diane in her company as much as possible, partly lest some chance word should reveal to the child the dangerous position in which her father was, partly because she was just herself—Lewis's daughter, with tricks of manner unconsciously his, with the same look in the eyes, the same little backward lift of the head, sometimes the very same inflection of voice.

On Monday came a telegram from Henriette :

"Please bring Diane with you," dismaying Grizel, who dreaded the long journey in winter for the child. However, the responsibility and the right were Henriette's, so she announced the fact when the children came in from school at dinner-time, and it was received with blank horror.

"Grizel! And we were skating to-morrow! Lilian has given us leave—and on Wednesday afternoon!"

"Lady Grizel! I needn't, need I? Can't you wire to mamma? Oh, I don't want to go."

But the fiat had gone forth, and early the next morning they started. Kiki and Marcel seeing them off from Altonbury Station, Kiki a veritable fairy child with her flaxen mane and her white wool suit and cap, dangling her skates,

and hopping from one foot to the other in the frosty red sunshine.

"We shall be back Saturday!" Diane cried as the train moved out of the station, whereupon Victor glanced at Grizel.

"Do you intend to return so early?"

"It depends upon grandpapa," she said, and would have liked to add, "and yourself," but dared not; for this morning he looked distinctly ill, and there was a drawn appearance about his face and grey shadows about the mouth that she did not at all like.

He talked very little, but Diane when London was past and the Channel drawing near, chattered unceasingly. The midday boat was full as usual, the sea calm, and the cold air invigorating, so the three paced up and down the deck, Diane's spirits rising every minute, one hand linked in Grizel's arm, the other in Victor's.

Suddenly right forward as they were about to turn, Grizel checked, and something stung in her eyes.

"France!" she said, and low on the frosty azure of the horizon was a low grey bank that looked like cloud.

At the thrill of emotion in her voice, Victor glanced down with a faint smile.

"You Latin!" he said. "It doesn't make us feel like that, does it you, Diane?"

Diane shook her head.

"Nowhere does unless dad is there," she said. "Then I get squiggles all up and down my tummy."

"Most eloquent! Don't you feel like that for me?"

She glanced up quickly into Victor's handsome saturnine face, laughed a negative, then touched by quick compunction, squeezed his arm.

"I love you tremendously, Victor—you know, don't you? Only—only it's different somehow!" He smiled, reassuring her that he was not hurt, and then stood lost

in thought gazing out to the coast-line that was getting momentarily nearer.

It was a relief to Grizel to see that he looked much better, and despite his teasing words to her France evidently appealed to him in no uncertain fashion, for once in the Paris train, ensconced comfortably in a reserved carriage, he was quite his most charming self, the grey shadows gone from his face. By the time they reached Amiens, Diane was fast asleep, and Victor moving over to sit opposite Grizel, began to talk of his play—the first time he had condescended to mention it.

“There has been another outcry of fashionable morality lately,” he remarked, after discussing some details of the work. “I believe ‘Anastasie’ will soon be restored again.”

“She censored very badly. I don’t see any use in reviving her corpse,” Grizel said, accepting the slang theatrical term with a smile at its familiarity.

“Is ‘La Vie Jeune’ so—sultry, Victor?”

He glanced across at her and laughed.

“It is—modern!” he retorted, “the purist will object and I fancy the public, too. Nothing save audacity of thought shocks us, Grizel—and I have transgressed the unwritten law pretty thoroughly. You have been out of Paris too long!”

“I am English enough—or prudish enough—to prefer audacity of thought to audacity of language,” she said. “If you have transgressed I applaud you and know I need not fear I shall blush.”

He laughed again and leant back more comfortably, lighting a cigarette and meeting his sister’s eyes with amusement in his own as he talked.

“I wonder why the world persists in calling us a people who live for frivolity and pleasure? We may be both—but we are not that and nothing else. On the contrary, we are of the most energetic people in Europe. Look at

the early hours of Paris in contrast to London, for instance—I put aside the Covent Garden trade as I do the fort des Halles—but work almost everywhere, certainly in mills, factories, workshops, and the Métro, to mention no other places, has begun at seven o'clock! Then, our artists, considered idle and careless! *Mon Dieu!* the miles of pictures in the Salon, the Grand Palais and the dozens of other places every year, and sometimes twice! Of the speed with which our journalists turn out their stuff, and the endless new plays produced almost every week all entailing endless rehearsals! France is amazingly energetic, extraordinarily industrious—yet the world judges us by the froth seen in Paris during a week's visit and the pages of *Le Rire!*”

He broke off to throw down the cigarette which had burned rapidly to a stump, his eyes brilliant, the fingers of the right hand snapping nervously, excitement in every line of face and tone of voice. After the listlessness of the last few days the change was amazing and Grizel was astounded.

“Why do you insist on the division between us so strongly?” she asked, after a moment. “Our blood is the same, and the English is in you as in me, yet you attack me as a firework might!”

He dropped back in his corner something of the excitement, although none of the vivid interest, dying out of his face.

“I owe little to England—you and the others much. After all, Paris has been my home for years—ever since I left Winchester. My work is written for Paris, my chief interests formed themselves there. Perhaps it was because I was the one chiefly sent to grandpapa—of the sons I mean.”

Grizel, watching him, felt immensely relieved at his cheerfulness.

“Yes, perhaps so. Yet I spent all my early years there

and my heart is still in the Rue Solfèrino. Yet the last eight years——” her face hardened, “wiped much of the French sunshine out of my life. I have to learn life again . . . I wonder if the second attempt will be easier or the reverse?”

She uttered the last words almost involuntarily, and Victor glanced at her sharply.

“Why should it be hard?” he asked, “you are free of that man, you have the child, you will marry again and be happy.”

The vision of Lewis’s face rose unbidden before Grizel’s eyes, the thought of all that might have been came unbidden to her brain, and for a minute or two she was silent, while the train tore shrieking through Longeau; then aware by his look that he was expecting an answer, she shrugged her shoulders.

“Who knows? Marriage and happiness are not synonymous.”

“They might be—for you. You have learned enough by experience to give you at least a fair chance.”

“There are sometimes insurmountable barriers,” she said, trying to speak indifferently. “One does not always love where one chooses.”

The vivid interest died out of his eyes leaving them suddenly hard and cold.

“That is very true,” he said, and relapsed into silence.

Presently as the scattered lights announced the outskirts of Paris, he glanced at Diane sleeping peacefully.

“She seems no worse for her journey,” he said. “But it was mad of Henriette to want her just now.”

His matter-of-fact mention of Henriette’s name never failed to give his sister a little shock: now, however, she hid it by crossing to the child and proceeding to wake her. Henriette had suggested that Victor should take her straight to the hotel, so when the train came to a standstill in the gloomy Gare du Nord they must part.

Diane, still sleepy, but enough her father's daughter to be a good traveller, took Grizel's arm and squeezed it hard.

"We'll take you to M. Lavel's, won't we, Victor, before we go to mamma?"

Grizel protested, having a great wish to get Diane to bed as quickly as possible, but Victor overruled her objections.

"It will not take five minutes longer," he said, "unless you prefer to come to the hotel and wait for me?"

"Are you coming to grandpapa's then?" she questioned, as they waited for the *douane*, and he nodded.

"Yes. I'm sleeping there to-night. My *appartement* is not ready till to-morrow—the gas has gone wrong. You will come?"

And Grizel agreed thankfully; at least, she could personally hand her precious little charge into Henriette's care. The short drive was soon accomplished, and in the vestibule of the hotel they found Henriette chatting to a certain artist, famous for his daring portraits. She was dressed exquisitely as ever, and as they were announced flew to meet them in very spontaneous delight.

She greeted Victor eagerly, but with no trace of embarrassment, and again the wild hope that she was mistaken came to life in Grizel's mind. She saw Diane delivered into Yvonne's faithful hands, with a sigh of relief, and spent a few pleasant minutes chatting. It was Victor who made the first move, and as they drove homeward appeared the most weary.

M. Louis was up when they arrived at the house, delighted to see his favourite niece, and able to give a good account of M. Lavel, and Grizel went to bed in better spirits than she had done for weeks past, despite the anxiety anent Gilbert and Lewis in the fastnesses beyond the Frontier.

The Renaissance Theatre was full the following evening,

although the boards advertising the legend "no performance" stood outside the building and in the foyer; Parisians knew better and flocked in smart crowds to the doors. Victor Lavel's work always commanded a public peculiarly its own, nervous, ferocious, enthusiastic or actively hostile; nothing he wrote was accepted quietly.

To-night not a seat was to be seen vacant in the house, and from their box Grizel and Henriette scanned the audience, while Louis pointed out the many celebrities present; women of the Faubourgs, delicately bred and nurtured, diplomats, politicians, artists, famous beauties exquisitely gowned of the half-world, in the upper seats pressmen, students and the like, and personal friends of the author scattered all over the house.

Just before the curtain rose Victor came for a moment into the box to speak to Louis. He was white with anxiety and apprehension, and after the few necessary words departed without speaking to Henriette or Grizel, and the latter felt herself growing pale in sympathy, for it was on this public and not that of the actual "first-night" twenty-four hours hence that the fate of the play depended.

A few minutes after the half-hour the curtain rose, and the audience settled down to criticise as the hush fell on the house. The first act went without disturbance or enthusiasm, and as usual people flocked out of the auditorium during the first *entr'acte*, but as the performance advanced uneasiness began to invade the house; it was plain that Victor's latest work would raise a storm, and excitement and partisanship mounted to a climax after the third act, when roars of applause mingled with shouts, yells of derision and general racket. Henriette and M. Louis hurried round to the stage in the interval, eager to report and congratulate, and the *presse parlée* got in its work with vigour in the foyer and lobbies.

After the fourth act, however, when the curtain finally fell, although the house was in an uproar, the success of

the play was fairly well assured, and the visits to Victor in the manager's room assumed the proportions of a ceremony. Even Grizel joined in the congratulations and embraces to which her brother was submitting, and enjoyed against her will the sight of his distinct loss of temper over various small incidents, for he was his own old self once again, arrogant to hide sensitiveness, brilliant, tempestuous, and his friends thronged him.

When at last with a chosen party he was allowed to depart for supper, he closed the evening by an angry scene with a leading critic and a declaration that no notices ought to be written till after the actual first night; but though right was technically on his side, immemorial custom was on the critic's, and Victor's threat to prosecute the paper for publishing a premature criticism, was politely ignored.

It was very late before the Rue Solfèrino was reached once again, and the eastern sky was faintly grey with a hint of the frozen dawn, as Grizel closed her bedroom door, realising that she was excessively tired.

The last few hours had been full of pleasure, excitement and colour, yet nevertheless a foreboding of evil weighed down her spirits which she tried in vain to banish, and despite her fatigue it was broad daylight before she slept.

She did not see Victor all that day, but Henriette lunched with her, and afterwards took Diane to a big charity concert that was being held at the Automobile Club, and Grizel went to the study to sit with her grandfather.

M. Lavel had had his afternoon rest, and welcomed her in his own particularly charming way, and Grizel sank down in a low chair by the open wood fire and let the peace of the room steal into her heart as she had so often done before.

Outside, the March wind shrieked and roared, buffeting the walls of the houses and scouring the grey surface of

the river to ruffled fury, while every now and then a scud of rain beat an angry tattoo against the windows; all was cold and comfortless without, while within was warmth and a beloved presence; yet the evil spirit refused to be entirely exorcised, and after a while Grizel was startled into speech, for M. Lavel had asked a question in his quietest way.

“Why are you so worried, my darling?”

She looked up, met his glance, and stretching out her hand, laid it on his; once again his penetration had surprised her, and she answered as truthfully as she could.

“I don’t quite know, grandpapa. I—feel oppressed—overshadowed by something that approaches. Even Paris—our dear Paris—seems unfamiliar and unfriendly.”

“You have had worrying news from Gilbert perhaps?”

“A little—you have heard?”

“Victor has told me of the position as my son knows it.”

Again she relapsed into silence because there seemed nothing whatever to say; she could not speak of her own private trouble or her never-ceasing fears for Henriette that were so bound up with it, and for once her grandfather’s power to comfort was *nil*.

Hardly conscious that she did so, she uttered a sigh, that voiced something more than she knew, and M. Lavel’s eyes, watching her so keenly, grew very tender. Leaning a little forward he spoke once more.

“So it has come to you at last—and with no joy.”

“Grandpapa!”

She started at the gently-uttered words, staring incredulously at him, her first dismayed impulse to hide, deny, scorn; but meeting his look her momentary resentment died away, and as quickly as he had spoken she answered him.

“Yes.”

There was another pause, then moving, she left her chair, and sinking down on the footstool beside him, leant

her head against him and closed her eyes, speaking just below her breath.

“How did you guess?”

“It was not difficult—for me,” he said. “Though to others imperceptible. It is he—Lewis—is it not?”

She nodded, all courage to resist dying out of her. After all, it was true, shamefully true, and of all beings in the world her grandfather was the one she could trust the most implicitly with the miserable secret.

“What made you think it was—he?” she asked at last, as he said no more, summoning all her courage for the question, and M. Lavel answered slowly, as if weighing his reasons.

“Because he is the type of man to appeal to you, and because you have never mentioned his name since you came. Each time Henriette spoke of him I watched you, and because I love you, I saw . . . my poor little one.”

There was no condemnation of shocked surprise in his voice, nothing but an intense pitying tenderness, and quite suddenly Grizel's courage gave way, only one word coming brokenly over and over again as she crouched, face hidden, against him. “Why? . . . why?”

He did not attempt to comfort her; it was better that she should not be too controlled, but he sat gazing into vacancy with one beautiful hand resting on her bowed head, and sadness in his eyes. With the keen wisdom that some old people possess he had feared danger even before Lewis himself. He had long known that Henriette could never satisfy the deepest longings of the man she had married should Lewis ever become aware of the existence of those longings, and in his beloved granddaughter M. Lavel had perceived the one woman in the world made for Lewis Clievedon. He did not ask now how far the tragedy had progressed, satisfied that neither of them would act dishonourably once knowledge had come to them; and after a while Grizel lifted her head

and busied herself with the handkerchief he gave in place of her own drenched morsel of lawn.

Even then, however, he did not speak; the sympathy between them was so great that no words were needed in a crisis such as this, only when Grizel left him to order tea and remove the traces of her rare tears before Henriette should arrive, she bent down and they exchanged a long and very tender embrace.

CHAPTER XXI

THAT evening she dined alone with M. Lavel, neither of them referring to the happenings of the afternoon, and when he had retired about ten as his custom was, Grizel ensconced herself by the fire in the fateful little room off the hall with a book, determined to occupy her mind and not let her thoughts wander.

Vain decision enough she found it, for ten minutes after she had commenced to read the book was lying face downward in her lap, and she was staring into the fire, her thoughts many thousands of miles away. There was no word from home of any further news from Gilgit or from Chitrál, but she could not rid herself of her anxiety concerning the expedition, knowing as she did something of frontier conditions, and it was with a start that she heard the front door open and steps curiously hesitating mount the three stairs immediately within it.

Putting aside the book she parted the curtains, and came face to face with Victor.

“Victor! I thought you were at the theatre——”

She broke off suddenly, for seeing his face in the brighter light of the room she knew it was no time for words.

“You’re ill,” she said, and all personal griefs and worries fled to the background. “Sit down and I’ll get you some cognac.”

He dropped heavily into a chair without speaking, and closed his eyes, for pain such as he had never imagined possible to endure had seized him for its own, pain that brought grey shadows about his mouth, and beads of sweat on his temples.

Grizel lost no time in asking questions, but slipping her arm beneath his head held the brandy to his lips, while she revolved schemes rapidly in her head.

“Drink this, dear, and wait a little quite quietly,” she said, as he opened his eyes. “Uncle Louis is at the clinique still, working on some tests. I’ll ring him up.”

But such a suggestion was very different from Victor’s desires, and he spoke jerkily.

“No—don’t. It’ll be better soon. Don’t send for any one. I’m better now.”

Indeed the greyness was passing, and Grizel, not daring to agitate him, was forced to assent, but when by the relaxing of his hands lying clenched along the arms of his chair she saw the mysterious attack was passing, she spoke authoritatively.

“You must get to bed. You’re not fit to be up. Let me help you.”

He tried to protest against troubling her, but he staggered as he rose, and Grizel could see he was not fit for any exertion. Intensely disturbed, yet outwardly calm, she slipped her arm round his waist and steadying his steps helped him up to the bare little room he occupied when he was at the Rue Solfèrino.

It was like ice, but no fire was possible, and her great desire was to get him lying down, so without needless worry she helped him to undress, and in a very few minutes he was in bed and shivering violently in the reaction from strain.

Hurrying to the kitchen Grizel found the stove still warm and soon coaxed a kettle to boil, whereon she filled a hot water bottle, fetched her own down quilt and proceeded to make him as comfortable as possible.

The shivering stopped after a few minutes and another small dose of brandy, and as she stood beside him he stretched out his hand and laid it on hers.

“Don’t tell Louis,” he said weakly, yet with returning

force, "the pain's nearly gone. It won't return just yet. Please don't mention it."

"Not mention it?" Grizel echoed, "my dear, you ought to have medical attention at once . . . there must be something very wrong."

A queer little smile twisted his mouth for an instant.

"I'm afraid there is," he said. "But I don't want Louis or grandpapa to know. We'll go back to England to-morrow. I'll see my own doctor. You'll come with me?"

For Victor to ask a favour was so unheard-of, that Grizel was very touched; bending, she kissed his forehead.

"Why, of course, if you would like me to. But Victor dear, shall you be fit to travel?"

"I may feel a little shaky, but this won't recur again if that's what you mean," he said. "I'm sorry to have made such a disturbance."

"You haven't!" she exclaimed indignantly. "Don't speak as if I grudged doing anything for you. I wish I had the chance to do more."

At her last words he smiled again, the queer little smile that twisted his mouth.

"You may get the chance very soon," he said. "And now don't stay in the cold any longer. I'm better and I shall go to sleep."

She protested, but he would not hear of her remaining, and after seeing he had all he needed, she went to her room, made up the stove, and discarding some of her clothes slipped on a warm dressing-gown and prepared to keep awake.

Twice during the night she crept into his room, but each time he was sleeping, and when she went to him after breakfast she found him dressed and looking much as usual, save for the drawn expression she had noticed several times.

Henriette, much to every one's surprise, decided to take

Diane south with her, and though Diane protested with a spirit new to her in her mother's company, Henriette was quite decided and carried her off that very afternoon.

Grizel went to the Gare de Lyon to see them off on their southern journey, too used to her friend's vagaries to be very much astonished, but frankly disapproving of her change of plan; and she found Henriette nervy and excitable, and Diane with mouth close-set and brooding eyes looking so like her father that she was startled.

"You are very disconcerting!" she remarked, as they paced slowly along the platform, "I thought we were to have Diane all the winter, and I don't know how I shall pacify Kiki."

Henriette glanced at her daughter who had grown amazingly in the past two months and was almost as tall as she was.

"I know. I expect Lewis will be furious, he hates hotels for her, but really I've been so bored!"

"I hate hotels, too," Diane put in rather sullenly. "You might have let me go back."

"You'll enjoy it all immensely!" Henriette assured her. "And it's only for a few weeks. Go and get in the carriage and wait there."

Diane gave one look at Grizel and obeyed, and Grizel spoke impetuously.

"Henriette—change your mind even now! Let her come back to Altonbury. I know the South will be glorious and the sunshine good for her, but I really do believe the healthy cold and the regular childish life is even better. I'll take every care of her!"

Henriette glanced up, slipped her hand in Grizel's arm, and sidled against her as the child they spoke of might have done.

"I know. You're a darling—and you're right, quite right. But I'm going to take her all the same. You've

improved her and she'll amuse me. After all it is rather hard if I haven't Lewis or her, isn't it ? ”

The short jerky sentences, the coaxing voice and caress were all difficult to resist ; not the least of Henriette's weapons was the power to disarm criticism by sheer charm of manner, even when her conduct was least admirable, and Grizel, whose love for her was deep and tender, knew she was beaten.

“ I know, too, dear—only—only you are about as fit to look after a child, even though she is your own, as Diane herself. You're just about as responsible as she is. It's very impertinent of me, isn't it, but you are made for sunshine and pleasures, not for responsibility, and Diane is a responsibility since her illness, even though she's ever so much stronger.”

“ I'll send her back soon ! I shall get tired of her, you know—of having her on my hands travelling. Don't look shocked, Grizel ! You know it's true. It's quite right what you said. I hate responsibility. But somehow to-day I felt I didn't want to be alone. Something——” she broke off, glanced at her watch, and spoke in a different tone that had a hint of fear in it.

“ Grizel ! What is the matter with Victor ? ”

Grizel started, and then as she did not answer, Henriette repeated her question, adding more imperatively : “ He looked ill all dinner-time, then the first act had only begun when he turned perfectly livid, said he felt ill, and went home. He frightened me. I hate illness and dread it. *What is it, Grizel ?* ”

“ I don't know,” Grizel spoke slowly. “ I have no idea. Yes, he is ill and he is going back with me to-night to see his own doctor in London.”

“ Is he ? I am glad he's seeing some one. I—it gave me a horrid feeling, and it was then I thought of taking Diane south. She'll distract me.”

Great as her love was, it did not blind Grizel to Henriette's

utter selfishness, and a flash of indignation lit her eyes and reflected itself in her voice.

"But surely you'd rather go without distraction than risk Diane's health?"

"Oh, Grizel, it isn't that! She's strong enough. And it's easy for you. You don't mind illness. I loathe and fear it. Oh, it's nearly time. I'd better get in. Yvonne is getting anxious."

At the foot of the steps she turned and held up her face. "Don't be cross, Grizel! Try to understand I do love you."

And Grizel knew her own weakness yet could only bend and kiss her.

"I know, darling. Take care of Diane, that's all, and let Yvonne send her to bed early. Write soon and often, won't you?"

"Yes. Every day. Oh! we're off!"

The cry of "En voiture!" "En voiture!" was echoing down the train's length and Diane thrust her head out of the window despairingly, saw Grizel and uttered a quick cry:

"Lady Grizel! Don't let me stay away long. Good-bye!"

The train was moving and Grizel could only call and wave her farewells, then turning walked out of the station hardly able to believe that Diane had gone.

That night she left Paris with Victor and the following morning they reached London, and there they parted, Grizel to travel to Altonbury, Victor to pay the medical visit he had promised and follow by a later train.

The snow and frost had vanished and a boisterous wind had sprung up that day, and when Grizel arrived she felt the touch of spring in the air and saw it in the saffron of the western sky. Marcel met her and was so exceedingly disappointed on hearing her news of Diane that he relapsed into silence, and hardly spoke as they walked home, leaving the luggage to follow.

Near the house, however, he bethought himself of the news he had for her.

"Father was in town yesterday and saw Hammersley," he said, naming the Cabinet Minister whom M. Jean knew well. "There's rather serious news from Chitrál. The expedition is shut up in the Fort. Besieged."

"Marcel! Besieged?"

"Yes. He'll tell you all he knows. It seems Sher Afzul and Umra Khan have joined forces and Lewis is shut up there with the whole of his force. There's to be a question asked in the House to-night. Father has gone up to hear all he can."

Here was food for anxiety with a vengeance, and for the first time Grizel was glad of Henriette's insistence with regard to Diane; unless the news were blurted out in front of the child, it would not be likely to reach her ears till the danger was a thing of the past.

At dinner, a quiet meal at which only Lilian and Marcel, Gabrielle and Grizel were present, the matter was discussed till it was threadbare, and then Lilian wisely remarking that speculation was merely adding to their worries, they talked instead of Paris, of Victor's new play, and M. Lavel's health.

The following day two things happened. Victor wired to say he was not coming down, but could Grizel meet him in town on the morrow, and in the evening M. Jean arrived from town with news of the Viceroy of India's—Lord Lambeth's—speech in the Supreme Legislative Council, which news had been given to him, M. Jean, by Hammersley.

It appeared that all communication with Chitrál had ceased since the first of March; that at the time of speaking Clievedon and the garrison with him were not believed to be in immediate danger save from one source, and that might be a very serious one—the inability to replenish supplies.

CHAPTER XXII

It was with an anxious heart that Grizel went to town the next day, for no further news was possible, and Lewis and her brother were among the garrison shut up in a hostile country far from any help, and it must be several weeks before any relief could reach them.

She took a bus at Liverpool Street and journeyed on top to Piccadilly, walked through to the Albany, and rang at her brother's door. His man opened it, looking rather unusually perturbed, and Grizel was shown into the sitting-room where she found Victor at his writing-table surrounded by papers, letters, MS. and the numberless odds and ends that accumulate when the eve of a departure is reached.

The flowers, of which Victor was usually so prodigal, were absent; a suit case lay open on a chair, and the whole room had a dismantled look that disturbed her strangely.

He welcomed her, pushed aside some papers so that she could sit near the fire, then swinging his chair round spoke abruptly.

"I asked you to come up to-day because I wanted to tell you something," he said, and Grizel's pulses quickened apprehensively. "Some months ago I realised all was not well and one thing combined with another made me consult a specialist. He gave me six months' grace and told me to come again. I went again yesterday—you recollect I promised you—and his verdict is not cheering. He advises an operation."

"Whom did you see?"

There was the slightest possible hesitation before he spoke, then :

“Rawlinson,” he said.

Grizel felt for the moment as though she had received a blow.

“Rawlinson ?” she echoed, “Rawlinson ? Victor ! He is the—the——”

“Man for cancer ? Quite so. That is why I saw him.”

For a moment there was silence, then Grizel stretched out her hand and laid it over his.

“Oh, my dear—my dear !” she said brokenly, “you have known this all the while and never told us. Victor—dearest——”

She dared not trust herself to say more, and the break in her voice told him how completely her sympathy was his ; for once he did not repel the touch of affection, but gripped her fingers closely with his, as if touched by it.

“I told Gilbert before he went—at least he found it out more or less for himself,” he said after a minute, speaking casually, but not relaxing his hold on her hand, “there was the chance Rawlinson was mistaken. He told me so.”

“And now ?”

“Now he is not.”

A cinder fell into the grate, and a shaft of March sunshine creeping across the carpet touched the books piled on the table.

“He suggests an operation quite soon ?” Grizel said at last.

“Yes.”

She asked a few more questions, deeply shocked and grieved by his news, learned that he intended to go into a nursing home, but not immediately as he had work he wished to finish, then almost against her will asked an unexpected question :

“ Does Henriette know ? ”

Victor gave her a sharp glance, then answered by a negative, and for a little silence reigned. “ I am going out of England for a short time,” he said presently. “ You will have noticed signs of packing. I am joining De Musset and his party at Biarritz and I shall see Henriette there. But I don't want her to know. I don't want any one to know.”

Grizel met his eyes gravely.

“ Why did you tell me ? ” she asked.

“ Because you had had the bad luck to see me in one of my attacks of pain, and because——” he paused a moment, then gave an odd little smile—“ I rather wanted to tell somebody and there was no one else I could trust.”

She rose and bending swiftly kissed him, and he did not repulse her, and Grizel, far too wise to push an advantage too far, resumed her chair again and asked him if he were leaving at once.

“ Yes, to-morrow,” he said, “ though I don't go to Biarritz till the 20th. I shouldn't have come back to London at all but that cursed attack made it imperative I should see Rawlinson. Now let's talk of other things than my own wretched affairs. I hear grave news from Chitrál. Father telegraphed this morning.”

They spoke of the English force surrounded in that hostile land, anxiety for Gilbert giving them a mutual interest, and when it was time for Grizel to go, Victor insisted on driving back with her. On the station as he waited to see her train go out, she had difficulty in restraining herself from voicing all the sympathy and tenderness his tragedy had called up, but she knew his temperament and merely let her parting handshake be a little longer, her, “ Good-bye, dear. God bless you,” a little more heartfelt than usual, then the whistle sounded and he stepped back from the door.

The next week or two Grizel did not find easy; there was no news whatever from Chitrál, Diane's letters were full of perplexed wondering why she heard nothing from her father, and of longing to be back at Altonbury, and M. Jean went about looking like a thundercloud in his anxiety.

Then came the welcome news that relief had started from Peshawar, and also the occasion of Gabrielle's eighteenth birthday, for which Lilian had promised her a dance, and though the elders did not feel much inclined for gaieties, it would, they felt, have been rather unnecessarily churlish to refuse such a pleasure to her.

Gabrielle herself, still very much of a child, was in a state of wild excitement as the day approached, and rendered still happier, and immensely flattered by receiving a letter from Henriette who announced she was back in England and would very much like an invitation.

On the letter being produced, both Lilian and Grizel uttered exclamations of amazement not unmixed with anger, and Grizel voiced both opinions when she exclaimed:

"Back already? She has only been in the south a fortnight—where is Diane?"

"She doesn't mention Diane," Gabrielle said. "But still, Grizel, it's very charming of her to want to come. May I wire, Lilian?"

Lilian nodded.

"By all means—ask her to stay the night, of course," and as Gabrielle ran off she turned to Grizel exclaiming:

"Surely she hasn't dragged that poor child back to London again?"

Grizel tried to believe it was impossible and wondered amazedly what had brought Henriette back to town; however, there was for the moment no means of finding

out, so she was obliged to let the matter drop, and be as interested as possible in Gabrielle's affairs.

Henriette arrived the night before the dance, Diane with her. The child's joy at getting back was extreme; but she looked pale and a little harassed, and Henriette herself supplied the clue.

"It's Lewis. She's fretting about him. I told her it would be all right, but she's been sleeping badly. Of course, that's why I came back. I meant to stay at least a month, but of course now I couldn't."

Her explanation was a great relief to Grizel, even though Victor wrote to say he, too, was coming to the dance; he also said that he was going to a nursing-home shortly, but had been unable to finish the work, upon which he was engaged, before now.

Grizel was so busy that evening, and during the next day, that she was unable to talk to Diane privately, but seeing how delighted she was to be once more in Kiki's society, decided that perhaps it was just as well.

Nine o'clock came at last and the old house was crowded with girlish forms and pretty faces, while the flutter of dainty frocks and the laughter of fresh young voices sounded without ceasing. Gabrielle made a charming hostess, and in her wholehearted enjoyment, drove care from Grizel's mind, and infected her with its delight, and the evening wore on in a maze of laughter and music; Henriette appearing as gay and full of heartfelt enjoyment as the youngest guest. Even Victor looked better, and indeed Grizel had little time to give him, for she was in constant demand, and was for once enjoying herself hugely.

The evening wore on gaily to its inevitable end, and even Gabrielle was growing sleepy when the last carriage rolled away from the door, and the grandfather clock hands pointed to ten minutes to four.

"Why it'll be getting light almost directly!" she said,

stifling a yawn as she stood at the head of the staircase bidding good night to M. Jean, "I am sleepy now but it's been glorious! Simply glorious every minute of it. You're an angel, papa!"

She kissed him enthusiastically and sauntered off to her dainty little firelit bedroom, and M. Jean was about to follow her example when Grizel saw a frown cross his brow and enquired the cause.

"I have mislaid a letter in the study," he said, "from M. Vivanni," naming a celebrated Italian composer who was a great friend of his, "Pst! I must fetch it."

"I will!" Grizel exclaimed, "I want to go down again to get a book. I'm bad enough always to take a book to bed though I don't often read it. Shall I bring the letter to your room or just file it away when I find it?"

"File it in my desk in the cupboard—and a thousand thanks. It is necessary that you rest to-morrow, *petite. Bonne nuit.*"

He saluted her, and she ran down again through the deserted house which had that dissipated look of rooms in which festivities have been lately concluded, entered the study and commenced the hunt for the missing letter. She found it at length and went into the huge cupboard that led from one side of the fireplace, to file it among her father's unanswered correspondence, and as she was kneeling on the floor putting it in the big rosewood desk in which he kept all such letters, heard the study door open and close and Henriette's voice, low but vigorous:

"Victor! Some one may come—ah, do not! I do not want you to kiss me—ever again!"

At the first sound of Henriette's voice, Grizel's natural impression was to spring to her feet and announce her presence, but before she could do so had come the fatal words that must brand Henriette—must brand them both—and Grizel remained as if rooted to the spot, horror-stricken.

She dared not move; even if she put her hands to her ears she would betray herself, for her hands were full of letters that could not be put down without a rustling of paper; there was nothing for it but to try and fix her attention by sheer force of will on something else. A vain enough effort as she found, for every word came clear as a bell, Henriette speaking again, this time fretfully.

"Why are you so inconsiderate as to wish to speak to me alone like this, Victor?"

"Henriette!" in Victor's usually cold voice there was a surging depth of passion and suffering, that despite his quiet, struck right at Grizel's heart, "Henriette! You know why. It is my last chance. I leave here to-morrow."

In the lamplight stood Henriette, could Grizel have seen her, a slender amber-clad figure, the colour blazing in her cheeks.

"It is all the more reason why this risk to me is needless. It is over. All of it! I wish it had never been."

"Why?"

"I—I made a mistake."

Something in her expression made him move nearer.

"And when did you come to that conclusion?"

"Months ago."

"Yet you said nothing that led me to think you had wearied of me till I told you of my—my—that I was not very well just now."

"I did—and it is nothing to do with your health."

She lied and he knew it, yet in his unreasoning passion for her, he tried to win some measure of comfort from those words.

"Then there is no need to pretend you are frightened of me to-night any more than any other time, Henriette—you can surely be kind to me—just to-night—just stay and talk a little—just that—as we have often done—because I—I am going away to-morrow. It won't hurt you to talk."

“M. Jean——”

“My father has gone to bed. Besides, what harm is there in you and I, old friends, staying up to talk, Henriette!”

She shrank back involuntarily as he approached, and at the sight he felt as though something snapped in his heart. Very slowly he spoke.

“It was a lie then—after all. I thought so.”

She looked up, pouting her underlip as Diane might have done.

“You are brutal! It was not a lie!”

“Then kiss me once more—Henriette, you shall!” At the sudden flame of passion in his voice she flung up her head, defiance mingled with fear in her eyes.

“Do not! I will not stay here. I do not want to talk to you. I do not think I want to see you ever again. I hate illness. It frightens me, and you are ill . . . ill . . . ill . . . It is horrible that you could even think I could care now!”

He made no further move towards her, but as though her fierce words hurt him physically, shrank as she had done, and stood a moment, his mouth twisting, his eyes ablaze. Suddenly as if exhausted, she gave a little sob.

“Why do you make me say such horrible things? Why do you torment me and risk people guessing? It is cruel of you and yet you pretend to love me . . . I do not mean all that, only, only——”

“Only because you happen to object to watching pain! Because you are utterly and completely selfish . . . good God, to think what I have sacrificed for your love . . . my honour, my right to face my fellows as a decent man, and it isn’t worth the having!”

His voice, harsh and shaking, filled Henriette with a new fear. She went to the door, pulling it violently open.

“Some one will hear—I *will* go!” she panted, and he made no effort to stop her, but stood where she had left him.

Grizel, an unwilling prisoner, knelt like a statue beside the open desk wholly unconscious that the tears were running down her face, hardly daring to breathe till the light suddenly going out and the slight sound of the door handle being turned told her she was alone.

CHAPTER XXIII

LEWIS came down from his look-out on the Water Tower, and made careful way with all possible dodging into cover towards the old durbar hall, a room of great size on the river side of the Fort, which had been turned into a hospital. There was a big courtyard here into which faced a transverse block of buildings, dividing the entire fort into two unequal oblongs, the further side being in the old days the private quarters and the women's part of the Mehtar's residence. In that part Lewis had his small room with Fisher on one side of him in a former chapel, and Mayhew and Sinclair in a dark apartment on the other. This latter had for light and air merely a ventilation hole just under the ceiling, but that did not constitute such a drawback as might have been expected, for if there was no window there was no chance of snipers' bullets as uninvited guests.

Just now, this particular afternoon, Lewis, with one of the native rajahs, had been inspecting an engineering device of his own: a drain from the stables outside the river wall, where noisome pools of green water had been seen dreadful to eye and nose alike.

With great care and much consultation they had decided what must be done and directed operations, with the result that a miniature canal had carried off the sewage, and Lewis had been much congratulated. Now, after careful inspection it had been found that owing to the configuration of the cliffs, the sewage had trickled round into the covered way to the river and emptied itself with

care into a natural rocky basin where buckets and water-skins were filled!

Lewis's language was brief but eloquent, and some Chitrális were set to repair the damage as best they could, then he had gone to the Water Tower, and now was desirous of seeing how the sick and wounded progressed.

It was no easy task to move about the Fort in daylight, for the place was so situated that every foot of courtyard or uncovered way was open to the attacking force; snipers in the village Dánin across the river, or the enemy snugly ensconced in sangars on the hillside could pour rifle fire into the Fort at either long or short range—a loopholed wall being strongly held by the besiegers on two sides of the Fort at the distance of about forty yards.

Casualties had been heavy during the past fortnight, since the siege had closed down; Wilson's knee was still too bad to permit him moving and he suffered much pain; men were constantly being hit, and many were down with dysentery and internal troubles resulting from the same cause—the bread.

Lewis had racked his brains in vain over this problem of getting the corn ground, for the only stones available for the purpose were, so one of the invaluable Sikhs told him, “too soft and too bad a shape.” As there was no mill they had to be used, however, and the grit that constantly wore away from them mixed with the flour and brought about the cases of sickness in question.

Lewis himself was far from strong after his recent attack, and he was being starved by Gilbert on a diet of Swiss milk—the last tin had been opened that morning—and hot water.

So it came about that, sniping or no sniping, he moved slowly, and entering the hospital, found Gilbert just finishing his afternoon round.

He made some enquiries and talked cheerfully to the sick and wounded men, but the atmosphere was dreadful, and weak as he was, a sick faintness began to come over him, so as the work there was for the moment finished, he took Gilbert's arm, and getting round under cover as best they could, they entered the small dark room where Wilson lay.

Despite the never-ceasing pain of his knee, Wilson greeted them cheerily as ever, and the other two sat down for a few minutes to discuss various matters of moment.

"You've moved the Sikhs from the south wall after all, I hear?" Wilson remarked, clasping his arms behind his head, and twisting his mouth into a grin to hide a sudden shoot of pain, "I suppose it's better."

"The south wall is admittedly the weakest, but after all the north tower and river parapet are the posts of honour. Once cut off from the water and our number will be up. Sinclair and I talked it over and decided it was the wisest thing to do. Fisher is to command the parapets when an alarm is raised, and Mayhew'll attend to the Kashmiris on the south."

"And Sinclair?"

"Inlying picket. Ready to move anywhere."

"The place is a bally band-room lately, with all the bugles goin'," Wilson remarked, "it's endless when half a dozen shots go."

"Yes. We've changed it. The Kashmiris are still doubtful and it upsets their little nerves."

The ping of a rifle bullet just outside the door heralded the approach of Fisher, grinning broadly.

"I've been workin' at your blessed sewage-farm all the afternoon, sir!" he said, addressing Lewis, "and I thought I'd earned a bath. I was getting a bit too highly scented. Want to see the bathroom? All the latest improvements, bathsalts, shower, plunge, and warranted bullet-proof."

“What the dickens have you been up to?” Wilson enquired. “Somebody report to me later.”

Lewis promised, laughing, but laughter was short-lived; utterly cut off as they were from the outer world the question of supplies must be an ever-present source of anxiety. There was none too much ammunition, and far too little food. The chief want at present, however, was hospital equipment and dressings—a serious enough thing when nearly six hundred men are cooped up in a space eighty yards square and subjected to a constant dropping rifle-fire from all points of the compass.

The hopeless overcrowding, the bad sanitation, the appalling smells, gave Lewis sleepless nights and worried days, and his own weakness added to his anxiety by preventing him doing as much work as he intended. The weather was daily changing, and though snow fell at intervals, there were signs that spring was not far distant, and if the siege were not raised before any degree of heat set in, disastrous epidemics would complete what starvation left undone. Even now the troops were suffering, chiefly from fever and dysentery, and there was no milk to give them, and one night an attempt on the part of the enemy to set fire to the Water Tower resulted in fresh disaster to the garrison.

A day or two later, it was discovered that a new sangar had been built during the previous hours of darkness, quite near the walls, and on the same day, just as it was getting dark, a Sikh subadar came to Lewis announcing the approach of a messenger, doubtless bearing a letter from Sher Afzul.

There was nothing new in this. Sher Afzul was in the habit of writing letters, sometimes boastful, sometimes merely full of reproaches; always reiterating the same thing—that Lewis should go back to Gilgit and remove the obnoxious British influence from Chitrál.

The last letter, however, contained a sentence that

puzzled Lewis, and calling for Sinclair they read it together in Wilson's room. Terms of peace were repeated as usual, but there was also news given of the capture of two British officers and some Sepoys at Reshun Fort not far away to the north, and Sher Afzul stated that a letter from one of them was in his hands.

There were two young officers at Reshun, as Lewis and the others knew, Stevens and Barry, but he refused to credit their capture for a moment; Sher Afzul's wiliness was so well known. Still, talking the matter over with the two senior military men, he decided to write a reply. Puzzled by the unvarying personal hostility, Lewis worded his letter frankly and fairly, asked Sher Afzul to come under truce to the Fort and bring the letter with him, urged him to spare Chitrál the further horror of warfare and enjoined him to submit while there was time to the Government of India.

The message was despatched, and Lewis lay awake half the night on his hard pallet, puzzling over the mysterious message, thinking of how he had discussed the very man to whom he had just written, with M. Lavel in Paris, and wondered, his heart contracting with pain, whether he would ever see Diane or Henriette again. Of Grizel, even now he would not let himself think—save when physical weakness so broke down the barrier of his will that his thoughts roamed masterless.

Diane's pale eager face with its cloud of dark hair stood out clearly before his mind's eye this night, and it seemed to him that in some way the child wanted him.

The impression was so strong that he started up, leaning on one elbow and staring into the darkness. Surely he was mistaken, yet despite the thousands of miles that separated them, he could have sworn he heard his daughter's voice calling him over and over again: "Daddy, oh daddy, daddy!"

A few stray shots rang out through the night, and he

lay down again, certain was he that she had called him, that she was in trouble or pain. His little daughter, Diane—his little chum—what was wrong? A cold sweat broke out on his forehead at his utter impotence to respond to that piteous cry, and he lay sleepless till dawn, trying to pray for her safety, tormented by doubt and fear.

Snow had fallen in the night, its carpet of white greeting him under a glorious blue sky, when he left his room the next morning, and meeting Gilbert at the entrance to the hospital, the latter stopped and stared.

“Good heavens, Lewis, you look like a ghost! Old trouble started again?”

“No. But I had a rotten night,” he said, and in a few brief words told of what he had experienced.

They were far too good friends for him to fear lack of understanding on Gilbert’s part.

“It was not nerves or imagination,” he ended, “I am not given to either and you know it.”

Gilbert nodded.

“I do. And I can’t pretend to explain. She, on her part, may have experienced a sense of your danger and called to you in very natural distress. There is no reason why not. People who refuse to believe in spiritual communication unaffected by mere physical matter, like distance, between two souls deeply attached by love and confidence, are merely ignorant fools. I don’t say it’s not rare, but I do maintain it is possible.”

Lewis nodded, frowning and staring at the ground with compressed lips. He was thin from his illness and looked worn and haggard, but the sense of reserve force and indomitable will had never left him.

“Well, it’s no good brooding over private worries,” he said, after a moment, “I’ll come round with you, and then I must get those coolies to work on the repairs to the south wall. It’s been a bit damaged.”

But though he spoke so, the sense of personal trouble

was with him all day, weighing on mind and heart alike, making him go about his work grimly.

At four another messenger arrived from the enemy and was shown into his presence by Pir Khan, whose expression of contemptuous disgust would have amused Lewis at any other time. Sinclair and Gilbert were both present, and as Lewis opened Sher Afzul's reply they saw there was an enclosure in it, and for the moment all three felt their hearts stand still, for as Lewis unfolded the sheet the signature of Barry was visible.

Sher Afzul's boast had been true, as the letter said in a curious mixture of French and English, for he and his fellow Lieutenant Stevens, with twenty Bengal sappers and miners, and some men of the Raghúnáth Regiment, conveying ammunition, had been attacked on the Chitrál side of Reshun some little time before, had lost many men and finally been taken prisoners.

White-lipped and stern, Lewis passed the letter to the two soldiers, and began to read Sher Afzul's epistle, which expressed a desire for friendliness, proof of which appeared in the sending of Barry's letter. Would his brave and great Highness, the "General" Clievedon, send his Indian head clerk to arrange. Lewis lost no time in replying, offering also a three days' armistice as a preliminary. Should this be agreed to, Sher Afzul was to hoist a white flag and the Fort should reply. With that the messenger was dismissed and Lewis turned to his companions.

"Time is everything if they play fair," he said, "*If!*"

"Our only chance to help Barry and Stevens is to get a letter through warning them of the state of things," Sinclair said. "Oh lord—if only they hurry up from India."

"I'm afraid they mean treachery at Reshun," Lewis rejoined wearily, "One can't trust any one of 'em."

The next morning the Indian clerk was sent off, primed with instructions and a written duplicate in case his nerves

or memory should fail, and then there was nothing to do except wait.

It was late before he returned with a long story of the day's proceedings, how Sher Afzul had refused to allow a letter to be sent to Barry, or an armistice by the mouth of a soldier commander, Umra Khan's cousin; one thing and one thing only could mean peace, that was the instant evacuation of the Fort by the English.

"I don't think Sher Afzul is a free agent in the affair for all his bluster," Lewis said, when the clerk had departed, and the Chitráli messenger waited without, under guard, to take the reply back.

"You see Amir Ali"—the clerk—"wasn't allowed to speak to him except in this young chieftain's presence."

"He's out for blood," Wilson said, with a wry grin—the consultation was being held in his room—"What have you written in reply?"

"Repeated my opinion that if he wishes for peace his actions aren't very peaceful, asked what guarantee he would give that we shouldn't be cut down as we evacuated the Fort, and I've suggested that if he wants to end the truce he can fire a gun at dusk and we shall understand. I've no hope of a reasonable answer but it's time gained anyway."

So the messenger departed once more, and presently returned with a final letter, polite as ever, stating that all the negotiations must be laid before Umra Khan at Kila Drosh, and that for the present there need be no more fighting. With that they were obliged to be content.

It was an agreeable change to be able to walk about the flat roofs and open courtyards of the Fort, during the next two or three days, with no fear of snipers' bullets, and to see cattle and goats straying over the land close up to the walls usually swept by rifle-fire. Heavy rain and a cold wind rather spoiled matters, for the pickets and sentries were drenched to the skin—an occurrence

which sent still more of the ill-fed men into the overcrowded hospital, and Gilbert worked harder and more silently than ever, worried chiefly by the fact that his store of chloroform, most precious drug, was reduced to one very small bottle, and that dressing had to be performed with a mixture of carbolic tooth-paste and water.

At last came the final letter from Sher Afzul, stating that Barry and Stevens were well, but being carried off in a southerly direction, and the inmates of the Fort began to grow still more uneasy, for each of the Englishmen knew that Barry had had rifles, ammunition, and a large quantity of gun-cotton with him when he was captured, and it was evident the besiegers would make good use of all the unexpected stores.

Meanwhile Lewis's own health began to give Gilbert more and more anxiety; he was frightfully weak, and the inability to diet him properly, gave but a poor chance against the illness which had fastened so vigorously upon him. Then too, the chief anxiety and the chief responsibility were his, to him the lives of the expedition were entrusted, and all the while he was evidently labouring under some personal and private worry for which there was no alleviation. He wished with all his heart that Lewis would speak to him of this secret trouble that he felt certain was contributing its quota to the burden already to be borne, but Lewis had so evidently no intention of confiding his private affairs to any living soul, that Gilbert had long ago given up hope. And so the weary days and weeks dragged on, and the hospital grew a little fuller, the condition of the miserable fort a little worse, the Indian and Kashmiri troops weaker, and the Englishmen more gaunt and hollow-eyed, as the lovely northern spring broke over the land.

CHAPTER XXIV

“ I SAY, Pir Khan, what the deuce is this ? ” Sinclair enquired, and a chorus of similar enquiries rose from every officer at the table as Pir Khan proudly set down a large bowl before Lewis, and answered with his customary inimitable dignity :

“ Beef tea, sahib ! ”

“ Oh lord ! Take it away ! You’re trying to poison us. ”

Pir Khan, who had apparently had a hand in making the soup in question, looked at his master with dumb appeal, but even Lewis was against him.

“ Yes, take it away, ” he said. “ Give it to the men, ” and the khitmutgar retreated sorrowfully leaving behind an appalling smell from the wooden bowl.

“ It is horse ! ” Fisher declared.

“ Bad cow ! ” suggested some one else, and “ Dead Chitráli, ” from Sinclair, and after much discussion the hungry men fell to upon half-spoiled rice and some of the eternal pea-flour soup, nobody talking much till Mayhew suddenly remarked :

“ By Jove, Lavel, have you ever tasted the ‘ wet devil ’ they do you at the Savoy—— ” Whereupon every one promptly proceeded to talk of food and compare dish by dish the various famous restaurants.

“ Voisin’s beats the lot ! ” Gilbert declared. “ There’s a way of doing a sole he has, with—— ”

“ Unpatriotic blighter ! ”

“ Isn’t your own country good enough for you ? ”

“ It is his own country as much as England, ” Sinclair

put in gently. "And it's my rum day. I've not touched my pint for a week. Pass it along, Lavel!"

There was a little very bad rum in the Fort, and it had been agreed that a pint should be issued once in twelve days to each British officer; the pint was a small one, the spirit execrable, but it was looked upon as a luxury nevertheless, and each man jealously guarded his store.

When Pir Khan had left them and they were chatting over wine and cigars as Fisher insisted on putting it, Sinclair broke abruptly into the conversation with a remark that promptly squashed any levity.

"I fancy we'll be attacked to-night. Hiram Singh reported to me just before dinner that he's seen fifty or so men moving from the bazaar to that hidden path by the river. It's the stable picket they're after, I think."

The talk promptly turned to the all-important topic of defence, and about ten Lewis paid a cautious visit to the picket in question, was nearly fired upon as an enemy by the Sikh sentries, and retired to bed hoping all was well.

It seemed to him that he had scarcely closed his eyes before a volley roused him, and he got up and dressed hastily, to find Sinclair and Lavel with the military picket ready for any emergency and Mayhew and Fisher on the river and south parapets. It was evidently a real attack, but on which front was difficult to determine till a brilliant light glared upon them from the south-east corner of the Fort, and a Chitráli came panting up with a message from Mayhew to say the enemy had set fire to the Gun Tower.

For a moment Lewis stood motionless, then swearing at ill-luck he hurried off, rousing every unarmed man in the Fort, and marshalling the frightened chattering crowd into long lines close to the tower, passing buckets, pails and pots of water from hand to hand after the fashion of an amateur fire brigade.

The fire had to be tackled from above, an appallingly difficult task, for the chief vantage point was the roof of a summer-house with a three-foot wall over which earth or water must be thrown—the thrower being exposed the while to the enemy's sniping.

The noise was terrific; the roaring and crackling of flames, the smashing of weak masonry and beams, the yells, volleys and cries of the enemy, and the high-pitched vociferous prayers of the priests in the Chitráli ranks. All combined to form a veritable nightmare, and one that no man taking part in it could easily forget.

Fighting the flames and the enemy at once, it was almost broad daylight before the former was got under though not fully conquered, or the latter for the moment wearied; then just as Lewis was stooping down to speak to a man he felt a violent blow on his shoulder, so violent that he pitched on his face believing one of the dislodged beams had struck him. At that instant, Lavel hurrying by, stopped on seeing his shoulder and coat drenched in blood.

"You're hit, man!" he exclaimed. "Here, come with me."

He lost no time in dragging him off, and in a very few minutes Lewis, much to his disgust, found himself bandaged and put ignominiously to bed.

Once there, dependent upon reports for the progress of the fighting, the large and deep wound—indeed the Snider bullet, though avoiding the bone, had carried away a good piece of the shoulder—and the consequent strained position causing acute physical discomfort, Lewis spent the day miserably enough, and the evening and night a prey to utter exhaustion of mind and body.

For a day or two all was quiet save for the never-ceasing sniping, then Lavel developed fever, which had the effect of making him more taciturn than ever, but apparently did not hinder him from working just as desperately as always; indeed there was no time for the only medical

officer to look after himself, so large were the number of sick and wounded, so appalling the conditions of the Fort.

Then came a day when it was discovered that the enemy were mining close to the walls, and Fisher in command of some of the Kashmiris proceeded to countermine; an attack was followed by a sortie in which the besieged men fought gallantly, and though heavily punished, brought back two prisoners into the Fort and a rumour that a British force was approaching.

To the starving wearied men the news, untrustworthy as it was, was far too good to be believed, and Lewis insisted on leaving his bed to take a hand with Lavel in nursing the wounded, for many men had been terribly hurt in the sortie.

As Lewis approached the hospital Gilbert met him, his face ashen, his eyes brilliant with fever and full of horror, and even as they met a dreadful sound rang out through the spring sunshine, the shriek of a man in unbearable agony.

"My God! How horrible!" Lewis exclaimed, his own lips paling. "Who is it?"

"Bir Singh," Gilbert answered, and his voice shook. "The poor devil is horribly injured. He can't live more than a few hours, and he's got to go through them like that!"

For Bir Singh, a splendid Sikh, and one of the best soldiers in the garrison, to die screaming in agony, was an unbearable thought, and as the awful cries rang out Lewis shuddered and caught Gilbert's arm.

"For God's sake give him chloroform—anything," he said, and Gilbert's face twisted.

"There isn't any more," he said harshly, and Lewis drew back and went with grim face to the hospital. He found there the dying man writhing on the floor biting at his clenched hands to keep back the sounds that in

shaming his manhood were adding tenfold to his agony, and at the sight of his livid face and tortured eyes Lewis, kneeling by his side to bathe his face with water, broke down completely.

Even in his extremity the amazing fact of such sympathy seemed to penetrate to the Sikh's brain; he could not speak, but his rolling eyes saw the tears on the Englishman's gaunt face, and with an almost superhuman effort he made a gesture as of a salute. Then a fierce convulsion took him, knotting the writhing limbs, the shriek choked in his throat, there was a jerk, a gasp, and he was dead.

Sick and shaking Lewis rose and turned away, feeling as though he would hear for ever those terrible sounds, and at that instant Mayhew came in with excitement written in his lean face.

"I've been interrogating the prisoners," he said, "and they swear a British force is coming rapidly up. They——" he jerked his head to indicate the enemy, "they're trying to get away their dead. Gad, I'd give something to know it's true."

Night fell with no further news, however, but shortly before ten Pir Khan came to the mess, his stately dignity for once disturbed.

"Sahib, there is a man, Ali Shah, without begging for admission. He says the besiegers have fled."

It was the work of a minute to have Ali Shah brought in before Lewis, though no precautions were relaxed, and as the man—the brother of one of the chieftains who had joined the British—told his tidings, it was hard to take them quietly.

The besiegers had indeed fled, he declared, Sher Afzul and all his following; there had been a battle at Nisa Gul, the sortie had hopelessly depressed the enemy in view of the fact that a victorious Gilgit force was encamped but two marches away.

As he was conducted from the mess the weary men sat

staring at one another, hardly daring to hope it was true, till the irrepressible Fisher burst out with a shout :

“ Then let's have the last cigarettes ! ”

It was a suggestion that everybody fell in with. The last precious cigarettes, seven in number, had been in the charge of one of the native nobles, and now as they were brought out and carefully lit, all tongues seemed loosened and a perfect babel of talk broke forth.

Lewis and Gilbert were too worn out for much noise, but even they did not feel inclined to sleep, and the night wore away peaceably for once.

Mayhew was ordered out with a company to scout early the next morning, and shortly after nine the amazing truth was known . . . Sir Henry Dysart was only two marches away . . . the siege was over.

The weather was glorious : the sky a cloudless blue, the air fresh and warm, and from the walls and roofs, safe at last, a wide view of fertile fields stretched to the encircling rampart of mountains ; wheat and barley waving gently in the sunshine, the fruit trees masses of pink and white blossom, the thick foliage of the great chenars near the south wall, that had been such a source of anxiety, now adding tenfold to the beauty of the scene to men who had spent so many weeks cooped up in the evil-smelling tiny fort.

If anything, every one was busier than before, but it was very different work now, for traders from the neighbouring villages were hurrying in to sell and bring little gifts of propitiation—groceries and the like. Sheep and goats were being requisitioned and clean food prepared for the soldiers and the sick. Lewis was hard at interviews and reports, with Mayhew to help, and visitors relieved from military duty trooped in to visit Wilson and promise to carry him out into the open directly a pleasant spot under the trees could be found ; promises which Wilson received with a grin, knowing the ways of humanity.

All doubt was ended that afternoon, for a letter came for Lewis from Dysart, and just after noon the following day the advance guard of the relief was seen crossing the bridge half a mile away.

Chitrál was relieved, and by a gallant force who had faced and conquered well-nigh insurmountable difficulties.

CHAPTER XXV

WHEN Grizel opened her eyes late the morning after her sister's dance, she lay for a little wondering what had happened. Then memory returned and she closed them again frowning. It was nine o'clock and time to get up, but she was very weary and very saddened, and the bright April sunlight pouring through her half-closed curtains seemed to mock the suffering the world held.

A knock at the door roused her, and calling "Come in!" she saw Kiki with a note in her hand.

"It's for you," she said, "Victor gave it me. He's just gone."

"Gone?" Grizel raised herself on her elbow and stared, holding out her hand for the envelope. "Where?"

"London, I suppose. He just carried a bag and said the other things could be sent when you heard."

She stood poised on one slim leg gazing out of the window, while Grizel read the scrawled lines:

"Dear Grizel,

"I'm off early as I don't wish to have any fuss. I have left a note for my father and have gone straight to Cavendish Place. You know the address. It takes place to-morrow morning.

"You have been very kind to me.

"VICTOR."

So he had gone—gone to face the ordeal before which the strongest nerves might be expected to quiver, and gone like this because of one woman's heartlessness. Grizel

knew now the truth, and in the stripping naked of Henriette's character lay suffering almost as keen as her sorrow for Victor.

After a moment she became aware that Kiki was still waiting.

"Is Diane up yet?" she asked.

"Yes, we've both been in the garden. The hyacinths are lovely, Grizel! Just like a pool of blue."

"Where is papa?"

"Not down yet."

"Very well. Order breakfast for me in twenty minutes, will you?"

Kiki ran off whistling gaily, and Grizel, languor forgotten, hurried her bath and toilet to the utmost of her power, busily turning over her plans.

She had promised, not once, nor twice, to stand by Henriette and never allow her loyalty and love to waver; Henriette was testing it severely now, and if in her heart something had died for ever in that love, Henriette must never know it. By the time she was dressed her mind was made up, and after an interview with M. Jean she wired her brother that she was coming to town and should stay quite near.

That done, she faced Henriette.

The dance was excuse for the latter's late rising, but to one so used to social duties it was poor for Henriette's pale cheeks and purple-shadowed eyes, when Grizel, entering the drawing-room, found her curled up by the fire.

At the sound of the opening door Henriette looked up.

"You? Come and talk to me!"

Grizel closed the door and came slowly forward. For once she did not know what to say, and as if Henriette divined the tension she began to speak hurriedly, plunging into the very subject Grizel would have wished to avoid.

"Isn't this anxiety over Chitrál ghastly? I can't help lying awake over it, and when I sleep I dream all the time.

When *will* they get there and relieve them? It's too dreadful! I'm just a wreck with anxiety. Grizel! You do think they'll be all right, don't you?"

Grizel pushed her chair round a little so that the sunlight did not fall directly upon her.

"I hardly dare think," she said, as quietly as she could. "The danger is extreme."

"If only Lewis hadn't gone back! I begged him not to go!"

"Surely he had no choice?" Grizel said, as if she were asking a question instead of stating a fact. "He was under orders."

Henriette shrugged her shoulders, was silent for a moment, then spoke hurriedly.

"I'm going home to-morrow—to Sloane Street. You'll keep Diane a little longer, won't you?"

"If you wish it."

"Of course I wish it . . . and . . . and . . . and you are coming up to town, M. Jean tells me. Will you come to me, Grizel?"

Just for a moment Grizel hesitated, longing to unburden her mind and tell Henriette what she knew; then she conquered the wish and answered without embarrassment.

"No. I can't do that. I want to be nearer Victor."

The colour which had been creeping back to Henriette's face faded suddenly, her eyes grew wide with a curious look of fear, she moved restlessly.

"I—it is—it is very dreadful!" she stammered. "Of course nobody dreamed it was so serious. I—I am horror-stricken. Do not let us talk of it."

And Grizel was only too willing to drop the subject.

It was a relief to her to get away from Altonbury, for her acute anxiety for the safety of those in Chitrál and for Victor made her feel disinclined for any company, and she established herself in a quiet little hotel not very

far from Cavendish Place to await the result of the morrow's dread occurrence. The next day was almost like June in its warmth and loveliness, and she took a long walk in the Park during the morning, knowing it was no good going to Cavendish Place and feeling quite unable to remain inactive. One thing comforted her, in a sorry fashion, it is true, but comforted nevertheless. Heartless as Henriette had been, it was a relief to know that she had terminated the miserable affair ; at least, while her husband was in deadly danger she was not being unfaithful to him. Of the future, should Lewis return, Grizel did not dare let herself think ; all she had determined was that if Victor recovered she and he would go away for at least a year and wander aimlessly wherever their fancy might dictate ; for though he did not guess it, she shared with him the burden of memories she desired to destroy.

It was nearly two o'clock before she reached Cavendish Place, where she was ushered into a pretty blue and white reception-room to await the verdict. She hated blue and white ever after.

There were bowls of bulbs in flower standing about the room, yellow daffodil, fragrant pheasant-eye narcissus, hyacinths, white, pink and mauve, heavy with scent ; magazines lay about, and there was no hint of tragedy in the pleasant sunny atmosphere, yet Grizel felt its very charm was horrible and longed to wait in the marble-floored hall, the gloom of which seemed so much more suited to the real nature of the house.

It seemed an eternity before footsteps sounded without, and she stood rigidly by the window, her hands pressed together, her face ashen, waiting for the door to open and the words of doom to be pronounced.

Cheerful voices came to her, then the door handle turned and Rawlinson entered, rubbing his hands after their final sterilised washing, his ruddy face alight with smiles.

“ Ah, my dear Lady Thurston, I’m delighted to see you and to have such news. The best of news—your brother is safely through the operation—ah ! ”

His tone changed suddenly, his hands darted out, those wonderful hands that wrought miracles of healing, for Grizel had swayed forward in a dead faint.

When she came to herself she was lying on the sofa, a nurse was holding some water to her lips, and Rawlinson was standing at her side watching her with grave eyes ; and at the sight of them the realisation of her utterly unexpected action sent the truant blood back into her cheeks.

“ Oh ! ” she exclaimed, horror-stricken, “ I—I am so sorry ! ” and tried to sit up, but the nurse kept her down by a gentle pressure on her shoulder, and the great surgeon’s frown vanished.

“ I’m afraid you’ve been exhausting yourself and forgetting such a thing as food exists ! ” he said, the smile coming back to his face. “ Now I will tell you the rest of my news if you’ll promise me not to faint again, and then I shall send you off to have a good solid luncheon with your father who will be down in a minute.”

He paused a second, glancing at the nurse who went quietly out of the room, then sat down in her place.

“ Lady Thurston, I was never so glad in my life to have made a wrong diagnosis,” he said. “ Your brother has been suffering from a growth which had every appearance of being—what we feared—until I operated this morning. It has proved to be benignant although necessitating removal. There is no trace of malignant disease whatever. All Mr. Lavel needs is care and rest and he will be as strong as I am.”

As he finished speaking Grizel hid her face, and when a moment or two later she looked up with wet lashes and a great thankfulness in her heart she was alone.

An hour and a half later she and M. Jean emerged

from the restaurant where they had lunched, immensely content with each other's company, and made their way through the pleasant sunny streets to the India Office and there once more Grizel waited, no longer pale and fearful but with eyes that shone on the whole world, for in addition to the glad news of Victor, there was a hope for good news from the East also.

She did not have to wait long and when M. Jean joined her he looked as excited as a boy, for the long weeks of anxiety had culminated in success. The siege of Chitrál was at an end.

CHAPTER XXVI

It is seldom in life that circumstances turn out as those who plan intend, and Grizel was almost astonished when she realised that the very thing she intended to do had come to pass. Yet here she was, this spring afternoon, sitting idly enough in the garden of the Villa Erminia, looking down on the blue expanse of the Lago di Como, while not twenty yards away Victor lay flat on his back in the sunshine. It was just a year since that fateful morning when she had waited at the nursing home in Cavendish Place, a year uneventful yet quick passing, and this particular morning for some unaccountable reason her thoughts had become reminiscent.

She had spent the year very much as she had planned. As soon as Victor was convalescent she had suggested they should go away together, and they had done so, travelling by easy stages to Switzerland where they had spent the summer; from there they had gone south as the autumn approached to Brindisi, had wintered in Egypt, spent March and April in Rome, and now were on their way home, always leisurely and comfortably at ease. The long year of idleness spent in new and beautiful scenes had worked wonders for Victor; and Grizel's company had been the best possible for him. The fact that they were both trying to forget things that were painful—unknown though that fact was each to the other—made for mutual help and strengthening, for behind their actions was the ever-present sense of making a plucky effort. And efforts are health-giving factors in life, as they both discovered.

It had cost Grizel some bitterness to leave baby Derek for so long, but he was too young to miss her, he was in keeping as safe as her own, and she felt that Victor needed her. She had felt, too, the need of getting away from the life around her, of readjusting her own mental attitude, of healing, and to her this year had been like a pause, giving her time to face her own soul and tackle the problems that had threatened its honour.

She could face the return to England or Paris with equanimity now, could contemplate meeting Lewis Clivedon with self-possession ; for though her love for him was not dead, never would by its nature die, it was held in check, its lawlessness conquered.

This afternoon she found herself wondering as to Victor's state of mind—his state of body was all that the most exacting sister could desire. Had he put Henriette out of his life, or would a meeting between them stir him again to passion and agony and sin ? He had paid dearly for his transgression and Grizel longed that there should be no renewal of suffering for him.

They intended going to England the following week, or they might change their minds and stay in Paris : it was novel as well as delightful to Grizel, to have no one's convenience to consult except her own—Victor being quite willing to wander as long as she chose.

She knew from Gilbert that Lewis had left India for a home appointment consequent on his health, which his illness at Chitrál had rendered precarious for a time at least, and she knew that Sir Henry Dysart, who had led the relief column on the now famous march from Peshawar, was also on his way home on six weeks' "special." What she did not know was that he was in Italy and making the speediest way to her, so she was very considerably astonished when the sound of footsteps made her look towards the house, and she saw his tall well-known figure following the servant along the path.

For a moment she was so startled that she did not move, then rising hastily went forward with hands outstretched.

“Sir Henry! You! I imagined you in mid-ocean!”

He bent over her hands, his eager eyes searching her face.

“I left the boat at Brindisi and chanced finding you,” he said; “this is luck I hardly expected, though M. Louis wired me from Paris where you would probably be.”

Her regard for him as an old and valued friend made her genuinely glad to see him, but there was regret mingled with her pleasure, for she knew that she must give him pain, must shatter the hopes with which he had come to Italy. All doubt with regard to her own feelings had fled, and though she had made herself put Lewis Clievedon out of her mind, she knew she could never love any other man.

This all flashed through her mind as she returned his greeting, then she drew attention to Victor’s recumbent form with a laugh.

“He said he was going to work this afternoon. Behold!”

They went down the straight path towards him, but suddenly Dysart checked himself.

“Why should he be disturbed?” he remarked. “There are two chairs invitingly placed. Let us sit there and talk.”

“Yes. We will. I want to hear and ask so much. You’ve had such an eventful time. There! That is delightful!”

She sank back against the cushions smiling up at him, and though they had both spoken of having much to say, both remained silent.

Immediately in front of them a low wall covered with clustering pink rambler formed a favourite promenade

for tiny darting lizards, and just beyond the wall the tops of young trees and feathery bamboo lifted themselves to the sun, for from the Villa garden the ground dropped precipitously to the lake which lay out two hundred feet below, a sheet of vivid azure, dotted here and there by the tiny black specks of boats. Just opposite, Bellagio clustered on its steep promontory, a veritable fairy town with its white walls and red roofs nestling amidst the chestnut woods that were just bursting into leaf, and beyond again, the mountains, their topmost ridges still glistening with snow, rose diamond-white against the cloudless blue.

The garden itself was but a narrow terrace of turf and blossom cut into the hillside, which rose another three hundred feet and more behind the Villa, clothed in trees whose branches were feathery with the delicate green of new foliage, the spires of poplars slender and graceful, the dainty clustering acacia, walnut with its spreading branches, and wild cherry one mass of snowy bloom.

To Grizel who had never before visited the Lakes, it was sufficient pleasure just to sit in the hot sunshine feasting her eyes on the loveliness around, or to wander along the roads, or climb through the steep meadows with their carpet of fragrant cowslips.

Dysart, too, felt for the moment utterly content with his surroundings, despite the strange intuition that had seized upon him directly they had met. Even in that instant it had seemed to him that he knew his hopes were not destined to be fulfilled; but just for the moment all was so exquisite that he could afford to put everything aside but the sheer pleasure of Grizel's company and the beauty of the scene around.

By and by they talked in the pleasantly informal manner of very good friends, and as the sunny afternoon slipped away his conviction grew stronger and stronger, and with it, despite the heartache, a new resolve that he

would spare himself and her the pain of putting that knowledge into words.

Not till tea was brought out and placed in the shade of an apple-tree, did Victor wake. Then with a yawn and a grunt he rolled over, saw his sister's guest and scrambled to his feet with an exclamation of amazement. He looked so different, so well and brown that Dysart could not but say so, and they stood chatting for a few moments with much mutual pleasure, till Victor, declaring he was exceedingly untidy, departed to the house to rectify the trouble, leaving the two friends alone.

For a moment Dysart stood where Victor had left him, looking down at Grizel's fair head; then dropping his long length into the chair at her side, he spoke abruptly.

"I am going on to London in a day or two. Can I execute any commission for you?"

Grizel's eyes met his.

"Are you? No, I think not, thank you. We are going home ourselves, or to Paris. We neither of us plan anything. We just do what we feel inclined. Don't you think it has answered for Victor?"

He looked at her very steadily.

"Not only for Victor—though he looks a different man," he said, "you yourself, Lady Thurston, are changed. When we met in Paris——" he hesitated, almost imperceptibly, and his thin nervous brown hand contracted for an instant. "When we met in Paris you looked tired yet expectant. You do not look tired now—on the contrary, you look splendidly well, but you do not look expectant either. You have reached the goal you dreamed about, have you not?"

For a moment Grizel did not reply, his scrutiny had surprised and disturbed her, then the truth of his observation revealed itself.

"Yes," she said at last, "you are right, I have reached the goal. But it is not what I dreamed of."

"It seldom is," he said rather bitterly, and silence fell again between them, broken by Victor emerging freshly groomed from the house. Whereupon Grizel came out of the day-dream into which she had fallen and poured out the tea.

Dysart left Como the following day without asking the question he had travelled from India to ask, and the next week Grizel and Victor also departed, not without regret, and journeyed leisurely northward to Lugano, where they spent two or three days while Grizel bought muslins and embroideries for the coming summer.

From Lugano they went to Basle, staying only one night in the spotless picturesque little town perched on the banks of the great sweeping river, for at Basle they seemed to have left the summer behind them, so lowering were the driving wracks of cloud, so wet and cold the air. There, too, an invitation from M. Lavel urged them to Paris instead of Altonbury, and passing through the San Gothard they came upon summer once more in the plains of France.

Paris seemed to Grizel more alluring than ever as the train ran through the suburbs this heavenly April evening, for the sky was exquisite in its sunset splendour, the air indescribably balmy, and the trees seemed greener, the houses whiter, the gardens more fair than she had ever seen before.

At the big pleasant Gare de Lyon, so different from the rest of the gloomy Parisian termini, Louis was waiting, and at sight of his face Grizel's unreasonably high spirits fell somewhat, for he was looking grave and rather sad, and fear for her grandfather leapt up in her heart.

His first words reassured her, however.

"No. My father is better than he has been for months. I must have been unconsciously worrying over my patients. Victor! You are a different being. Thank God for it!"

They drove to the rue Solfèrino in an open cab through the lovely spring twilight along the Boulevard St. Germain with its familiar shops and cafés, its hotels behind great gates, and its grey stone façades. The chestnuts were just coming into bloom, and in the air was that indescribable scent of Paris in springtime that no other city can quite attain.

Victor, too, was in excellent spirits and was already planning numerous engagements, and it seemed almost like a dream to Grizel when she found herself kneeling by her grandfather's chair clasped in his arms.

For a few minutes they neither of them spoke, only held fast in a mutual embrace and drank in the joy of their reunion, then M. Lavel put her gently from him and scanned her face with tender eyes. What he saw apparently satisfied him, for he kissed her forehead and rested one beautiful hand for a moment in blessing on her head. Grizel kissed the hand as it was withdrawn, smiled, and began to talk.

Victor stayed a day or two at the rue Solfèrino, then hearing by chance that Henriette and Lewis were coming to Paris, accepted an invitation to visit some friends in the Vosges country, and Grizel found herself facing a meeting she would have preferred to avoid. They were arriving on the Friday, and on Saturday came an eager little note from Henriette, begging her to dine with them at their hotel and go on to a theatre afterwards.

To refuse would have been impossible, and Grizel found herself driving across the Place de la Concorde and up the Champs Elysées towards the new and very splendid hotel Henriette had chosen, in the soft afterglow of a May evening, for April had sunk to rest two days before.

It was, or seemed to Grizel, a specially beautiful evening with a cloudless sky of tenderest blue in the purity of which a few stars already glimmered; and the air was

fragrant with the scent of the chestnuts, and the lilac that is such a feature of Paris in spring. It was a little early as yet for the fashionable Parisian to be going out to dine, but even so there was no lack of carriages ascending and descending the long avenue, and Grizel, leaning back in her little open *fiacre*, resolutely kept her thoughts away from the man she must so shortly meet, and gave herself up to the loveliness of the evening.

The "Superb" at last.

The cab drew up before the great stone hotel, with its wide tree-shaded terrace where half the world and his wife would dine presently, and Grizel was conducted to a private sitting-room leading out to it. There, standing in one of the long windows that opened on to a balcony, gazing out over the Champs Elysées, was a broad-shouldered figure she knew well. Otherwise the room was empty, and for all her schooling Grizel's pulses leapt and her heart seemed to hammer in her throat. Then, hearing her announced, he turned round and came across with the quick decisive step she knew of old, his hand outstretched, his eyes very bright and eager.

"You!" he said. "At last——"

For a moment their hands locked, then Grizel drew back and Lewis laughed a little, as if aware that his greeting had been rather unconventional.

"Henriette will be down in a moment," he said. "She was rather tired and I persuaded her to rest after tea. By Jove, Lady Thurston, it is very good to see you again! How splendidly fit you look!"

He seemed to lay stress upon his pleasure at the meeting, and Grizel felt insensibly relieved at the successful issue.

"I am 'splendidly fit,'" she replied, glancing at him with a smile, as she took one of the chairs by the open window, "I wish I could say the same of you. You don't look very well. You're thinner."

"I shall be all right in a little while. It's been rather a trying experience, this last sixteen months. I've chucked work for a while and am taking a complete holiday."

"And Diane? How is she?"

"Very well indeed. I find her grown tremendously. Altonbury did her a great deal of good."

"She must be very happy at having you at home."

He nodded.

"Yes, I think she is. What are your plans for the future? Are you going to England or remaining here?"

"I am going to Altonbury for the summer. Then I am not quite certain. Either I shall settle in London or here. My grandfather wants me."

Lewis hesitated a moment. Then spoke rather diffidently.

"I hope you will choose London," he said.

Grizel moved sharply, turning in her chair so that she could look out into the purple dusk, for despite herself, his nearness affected her more than she desired.

"May I have a cigarette, Lady Thurston?"

His voice cool and ordinary broke upon her momentary discomfort, and as he took one from his case and lit it she began to scorn herself for her weakness. After all, his words had been the merest politeness, doubly due between friends, and she ventured to glance at him as he sat on the arm of the couch near by, looking like her into the soft gloom without the windows.

He was still bronzed, but she noted how grey his hair was on the temples and how the lines about his mouth and eyes had deepened. The whole face, while losing some of its look of superb physical health, had grown harder and sterner, and for the first time she thought he looked tired, although his carriage was as erect, his movements as decisive as ever.

After a moment, as though aware of her scrutiny, he turned, and this time she met his glance frankly.

“Chitrál has altered you,” she said. “It is not to be wondered at. Ah! Here is Henriette!”

The slender little figure, in its flesh-pink gauzy draperies, darted across the floor, hands outstretched, eyes shining; and Grizel, returning the eager greeting, wondered why she could not condemn more strongly this charming little sinner.

“I’ve been simply longing to see you!” Henriette exclaimed, as they went in to dinner. “I’ve so much to tell you. Will you lunch with me to-morrow—*à deux*?”

Grizel promised and the talk became general between the three.

Once or twice she thought Henriette exceptionally excited, and certainly her cheeks were more flushed than usual, her eyes more brilliant; there was a vividness about her more extreme than was customary, and she was not altogether surprised when, at the close of dinner, Henriette spoke abruptly:

“Need we go to the theatre? I am tired.”

So they sat and talked in the luxurious lounge while an orchestra somewhere in the distance played *Délibes*, and quite suddenly, about ten, Henriette fell silent and leant back in her corner of the lounge, the brilliance of her eyes clouding.

In answer to Lewis’s anxious enquiry, however, she answered petulantly:

“It’s nothing. Yes, I’m tired. I’ve got a headache. I won’t talk for a little.”

But Grizel rose to go at once: something in Henriette’s appearance had caused her vague uneasiness for the last two hours; and as Lewis was putting her into her cab she spoke on an impulse.

“Mr. Clievedon, make Henriette go to bed and stay there part of to-morrow. She looks feverish.”

“She has complained of a headache several times during the last few days,” he said. “I wanted her to rest and

see a doctor, but she'd do neither. However, I'll get one and not tell her."

They exchanged a formal farewell, Grizel's thoughts for once being elsewhere, and as she drove home through the starlit balmy darkness the uneasiness grew and deepened. Henriette was ill. Of that she was certain.

CHAPTER XXVII

GRIZEL was not at all surprised to receive a *pneumatique* from Lewis the following morning saying Henriette was not able to keep her luncheon appointment, and late in the afternoon she met him in the Boulevard Haussmann, as she was on her way by a roundabout route—caused by shopping—to make a personal enquiry at the hotel.

As they shook hands he spoke with some anxiety.

“Henriette is still in bed. The doctor I called in seems to think she’s got a touch of influenza. She’s feverish and complains of her head, and she was horribly annoyed with me because I wouldn’t let her keep her appointment with you.”

The frown faded from his face as he uttered the last words and he smiled, recollecting Henriette’s fury of indignation.

“I’m glad you were strict,” Grizel returned, “I was on my way to ask after her. Might I see her?”

Lewis hesitated.

“I don’t think I would,” he said at last, “She’s under orders to be perfectly quiet, so I’ve left her with Yvonne. There’s no means discovered of keeping Henriette quiet if there is a person available to talk to. Which way are you going? I’m only out for exercise, so perhaps you’ll let me accompany you?”

“I shall be very pleased to have your society,” she rejoined. “And if I’m not to go to the hotel I’ve nothing particular to do either.”

“Let’s go up to the Avenue Bois de Boulogne, cut through to Passy along the Rue de la Pompe, and walk

back along the Cours la Reine. Or just sit in the Champs Elysées perhaps ? ”

“ That wouldn’t give you any exercise. Your first idea was much the best ! ” Grizel retorted, “ and we’ll carry it out and have quite a long walk. ”

They turned westward walking briskly, at first not talking much, both feeling the constraint of their Altonbury meeting. Then Grizel made some remark about Gilbert, and presently as they went she drew from him the picture of the siege ; the suspense, the hopes and fears for Barry and Stevens—both of whom Umra Khan had released unhurt on Dysart’s approach—the daily life, even something of the daily misery and discomfort. His sense of her comprehension as well as her sympathy was strong, and he found himself talking of his work, and what had happened concerning it, more freely than he had ever talked to any one in his life. And alongside both of those qualities in Grizel’s mind was an odd little thought—the price of that work. They had walked fast in their mutual interest, and reaching the Pont Alexandre turned back to the Champs Elysées and sat there, for it was still some little time to sunset, and both felt all had not been said.

“ Umra Khan behaved in the end exceedingly well,” Lewis said, idly watching some children near by in charge of a stout and resplendent *bonne*, “ he dealt treacherously up to a point with us, but he has the virtues of his faults and he can appreciate bravery. It would not only have been easy to have ill-treated Barry and Stevens ; it was difficult, even dangerous not to do so. He is sincere according to his lights, and he is a strong, clean-living man. I hope he’ll settle down now and let us put things right for him, for he’s got possibilities in him and might make a fine and useful ruler. ”

He was silent a moment, then spoke in a half-amused tone.

“It’s strange to be back here again with everything so unchanged.”

Grizel glanced at him quickly, opened her lips to speak and thought better of it. It was so characteristic of his type—the type that had made Empire a vital actuality, not a wonderful dream—to take no heed of the price paid, if the result attained was the result worked for. It was doubtful if such men ever gave a thought to the ‘years that the locust hath eaten,’ epitomised in broken, or at best, injured health.

That Lewis, taking him as an example, would never be the strong man he was before the siege she had learnt from Louis and her brother Gilbert; yet she knew Lewis himself would simply fail to understand the point of view of any one who would enquire if it had been worth while.

Peace had been restored in a country torn by dissensions and drenched in blood; restored and assured. Britain had stretched forth her hand a little further into the remote fastnesses of the earth, and that hand meant justice—rough perhaps and full enough of faults, but justice nevertheless, and a degree of safety to life and land unknown before.

It was worth while.

Her long silence attracted his attention after a while, though his thoughts, too, had been roaming very far away, and he looked at her with an apology which she checked abruptly.

“Don’t! We are too good friends, I hope, not to be able to be silent with each other,” she said, and meeting her eyes he nodded.

“That’s so. It’s been good to talk to you, though I don’t as a rule find it very easy to talk to people—about the things that matter.”

She flushed a little as much at his tone and look as his words, and after a minute or two rose to her feet.

"We're dining out, Uncle Louis and I," she said, "so I must be going homewards. No, don't come. You will be able to talk to Henriette now, as you have been away so long. She will surely have had a good rest. Give her my love. I will call to-morrow to see how she is."

Her tone was final, and he had no choice but to obey her wishes; and indeed, they were more or less his own, for he felt he might go to Henriette now without infringing the doctor's orders and keep her company after her rather dull day.

He was disturbed, therefore, to find her if anything less well than when he had left her at four o'clock, and not being entirely satisfied with the doctor recommended to him at the hotel, who had merely dismissed the case with one visit, he telephoned fairly late to Louis Lavel, and left a message requesting him to call in the morning on his way to the clinique.

Henriette spent a restless night, and towards morning fell into a heavy, unrefreshing sleep, from which she awakened to see M. Louis at her bedside in company with her husband.

"You!" she said, "oh, how funny! I did not know Lewis had asked you to come. I've only got a headache—a stupid one that won't go—and I feel tired. I expect it's influenza."

She smiled up at him, and Lewis put back the tangle of curls from her forehead with the soothing gentleness he might have used with Diane.

"I don't like you having a headache even if it is stupid," he said, and Louis came closer, held out a thermometer and took the slender wrist between his fingers.

"No indeed. And influenza this time of year is a crime," he said, talking idly for a few seconds, then as he took the little instrument out and turned away to read it: "Grizel is quite annoyed with you. She has made all kinds——" he broke off for an infinitesimal second as he read the

mercury, then went on without a change of tone—"of plans and it is a waste of the sunshine to be in bed, isn't it? No. Don't try to sit up. Lie quite flat and as still as you can. We must try to get rid of the headache as quickly as possible."

"It is stupid to lie here," Henriette agreed, but her tone had suddenly become listless, and M. Louis took advantage of it.

"I think I'll close the shutters at this window," he said, and pulled to the green jalousies letting a softer light filter into the room through the open glass, "and try if you can sleep for a little. Some one will come to you in a short while and till then I want you to be quite quiet."

He stood a minute looking down at her, then signed Lewis to precede him out of the room.

In the corridor Lewis glanced at him knowing well enough that things were wrong, but said nothing as he led M. Louis into their private sitting-room, and there M. Louis went straight to the telephone, gave his number, and glanced at the younger man.

"I must get a nurse," he said quietly and Lewis, a little paler than usual, waited as he gave his orders.

Then, putting the instrument aside, he turned round.

"Clievedon," he said, "why did you not send for me before?"

"I called in the man they recommended here yesterday. He said she might have a touch of influenza."

"Influenza!" Louis's voice held mingled anger and grief. "It is typhoid."

"Typhoid?"

Lewis echoed the word half-stupidly and the other laid a hand on his arm.

"Yes. Keep your wits about you and do not get frightened. The thing has got a bad start, and I do not believe in telling you the situation is not serious. It is. Very. But that is not hopeless. D'you understand?"

Louis's words had given Lewis time to pull himself together, and as they waited for the nurse's arrival, he learned all that was possible at the present stage with regard to his wife's state, and made arrangements at the hotel—and from then onward began the battle for Henriette's life.

Grizel was deeply shocked and grieved when her uncle brought back the news, and would have gone straight away to the "Superb" had not M. Louis prevented her.

"You can do nothing," he said. "I have engaged competent nurses and there remains no more. We must just wait."

So the days dragged on, Grizel waiting and hoping, wondering if she ought to let Victor know, and finally mentioning the matter in the midst of a letter—a mention that brought Victor back to Paris looking stern and harassed, more like the Victor of old.

He arrived on a hot May afternoon, and both feeling the oppression of the house, he and Grizel went to the Bois for a walk, and there talked of anything and everything but the matter that was engrossing them both. Bulletins were issued every day, and from then onward either Victor or one of the household called at the hotel every evening, and always the news was the same. No improvement, condition critical.

All this while Grizel had not seen Lewis; avoiding rather than seeking any chance to do so, for she felt a delicacy in meeting him at all at such a time; but one day soon after Victor's arrival, coming back from a visit to some acquaintances she met him in the Tuileries Gardens and they both stopped, mutually relieved at the meeting.

Grizel's first question: "How is she?" was answered almost before she asked it by Lewis's face, and she was shocked to see how ill he looked himself.

"They expect the crisis to-night," he said. "She is

terribly ill. I have just been to the house on the chance of finding you."

"I am sorry I was out," Grizel said gently, and turned back with him to walk a little way. "Are you going straight back now?"

"Yes. Will you—are you tired?"

"Not in the least. Shall I walk part of the way with you?"

"Please do," he said, and they made their way westwards through the hot May sunshine up the Champs Elysées just now in the flood-tide of life, crowded with carriages, gay with flowers, fragrant with the scent of lime and chestnut—a place that is always beautiful, even on a January day when the wind scours the shining wet pavements and bends the bare tree-branches in bitter fury.

Everything was so full of the joy of life to-day, so full of promise that Death seemed incongruous, and the thought of Henriette—so vital herself—pitiful and almost unreal. The same thoughts animated both Lewis and Grizel as they walked, yet neither spoke till suddenly Lewis broke the silence by saying:

"I have sent for Diane. She has been spending Easter with an uncle in London, and I expect her to-night. I wanted to spare her the anxiety if I could, but M. Louis advised it."

"I think you did quite right. You are going to have her at the hotel with you? It will be good for you both to have each other."

He nodded.

"Yes. I want her badly. But you—you will be with her too as much as you can? If——" He broke off again not knowing how to complete his sentence. Everything hung on that "if." Near the top of the Avenue Grizel said good-bye, and turning walked homewards through the golden sunshine angry with herself that even at such

a time she could find pleasure in the surroundings she so loved. The next day early came a message that took away all her self-reproach.

The crisis had passed favourably.

That afternoon she went up to the hotel with M. Louis, and as he went to Henriette's room and she was shown into the private sitting-room, a slim white-clad figure leapt up from a stool by the long open window with a cry of joyous welcome :

"Lady Grizel! Oh! How lovely to see you again!"

Grizel caught the slim figure and held it closely kissing the pale eager face, then drawing back surveyed it.

"Diane! How you've grown!"

Diane in the past year had certainly grown amazingly and had lost much of that nervous, wistful look that had so distressed Grizel. Pale she evidently always would be but she was slim and graceful as a young fawn, and the pallor was no longer that of fragility but the warm creaminess of health. Whatever Lewis had lost or missed in life, he certainly had a daughter of whom he could be very proud.

"Yes. Haven't I? And I've been everywhere with daddy till just this Easter. I'm fourteen, you know, and I'm to come to school here quite soon . . . if——" she paused, trying to subdue her eagerness to talk, and Grizel realised with something of a shock how little Henriette counted for in Diane's life.

Lewis entered at that moment, and the child turned at once to him, her eyes lighting up with a look of devotion extraordinary to see. As he welcomed Grizel his arm went round his daughter, and as they discussed the morning's bulletin standing by the window, he held Diane close to his side as if overjoyed to have her with him once again.

"I've come to know if I may carry Diane off for an hour or two," Grizel said, "it's such a heavenly day and

she ought to be out. So I wondered if you would let us wander off 'by our lones' to a little place near Malmaison I know about, where we could have *déjeuner* and a country walk. Would you like it, dear?"

"Love it!" Diane responded ecstatically. "May I, daddy?"

"With pleasure since Lady Thurston is so kind. Run off to Yvonne and get ready," and as the child darted off he turned to Grizel.

"It sounds tempting," he said, "a country walk on such a day—only I don't like to leave the hotel for long yet. May I come another time, when Henriette is a little better?"

"Of course! It would do you good. You are looking very far from well yourself. Do get out this lovely morning. You can do no good by staying in, it would be quite simple to leave word where you intend going. Why not take a drive with my grandfather? He would be delighted to have your company, and he has a very soothing effect when one is jangled and tired."

The suggestion was evidently to Lewis's taste, for he smiled and went straight to the telephone.

"I will!" he said, and after ordering a carriage rang up the rue Solfèrino and made the appointment just as Diane in spotless white from head to foot made her reappearance.

Five minutes later she and Grizel were walking towards the Étoile to take their seats in the antiquated little train that puffs and rattles along the St. Germain road.

Regardless of smuts they sat in the open car and both enjoyed every moment of the way, having a great deal to talk about, and this particular excursion being quite new to Diane. She was highly amused by the stalls and wares all along the road beyond the fortifications, where it climbs slowly uphill between rather dreary stretches of market gardens, and was in ecstasies, when, turning

abruptly to the left, the way sloped downhill and grew prettier and more shady. The last mile and a half the trees arched over the road casting dancing patches of sun and shade athwart the dusty way, revealing on the left an occasional glimpse of a house standing back amongst its lovely grounds, on the right stretches of river glittering in the sunshine and reflecting the unclouded blue of the sky.

Arrived at the funny little halt where they must alight, Diane paused to stroke and talk to two big mouse-coloured oxen yoked to a timber cart, drawing upon herself a kindly compliment from the ancient one-eyed driver in charge, then dancing along for sheer delight she accompanied Grizel down a plane-shaded by-way that led to the river. The excursion, though perhaps no more enchanting than many another within a dozen miles of Paris, was nevertheless to stand out in both their lives as one of the days that are never forgotten, and the memory of which is a secret charm and refreshment in many a weary moment of future years.

They walked till nearly two o'clock, then returned for *déjeuner* to a little inn on the high road, where they were conducted to the flat roof of the bar and sat under the arching branches of elm-trees in the open air and lunched on cold ham, excellent yellow wine, and a great plate of early cherries, black and juicy, with ice crushed and sparkling heaped upon them and the leaves in which they nestled.

They ate and talked and laughed, the need for anxiety for Henriette being, humanly speaking, over, to the accompaniment of a summer wind rustling the branches overhead, the occasional clucking of hens somewhere below in the background, and the murmur of voices and laughter rising now and then from the inn itself.

All around was the fresh loveliness of early summer, over their heads the interlacing foliage giving swiftly

moving glimpses of a cloudless sky, and as Diane remarked, it was almost like lunching in the green retirement of a tree itself.

They were both quite sorry when it was time to go, but the day's outing was not yet over, for when they arrived at the *Étoile* it was after four, and Grizel suggested tea at Rumpelmeyer's and a drive home afterwards, thereby reducing Diane to a state of delight that was almost speechless.

It was well after half-past five when they reached the "Superb" and found Lewis waiting for them.

One glance at his face told Grizel something was amiss, but he evidently did not want Diane to see it and sent her off to Yvonne with a caress and a :

"I'll hear all about it presently, darling."

When the door had closed behind her he came across to Grizel.

"Henriette is not so well," he said abruptly. "Unfavourable symptoms have appeared—and she keeps asking for you. She won't see me at all. Says it's you she wants. Grizel——" in the anxiety of the moment his use of her name passed unheeded by them both, "she seems to have something on her mind, something which she wants to tell you and you only. Can you—will you—come?"

Fear of that "something" flashed into Grizel's mind, a certainty of what troubled poor little Henriette, but she allowed no hint of her knowledge to appear in voice or tone.

"Of course I will come," she said, "if I may I will go to Diane's room and wash and take off my hat, then I'll be ready."

"Do, please," he said, "I'll show you the way."

And five minutes later she was at the sick room door. There a nursing-sister met her, listened to a few words from Lewis, and then, as he went away, led Grizel to Henriette.

The room was very bare, all unnecessary hangings and furniture having been removed, but it was still pleasant, with tree-branches waving across the windows and evening sunshine flooding it. Nearly in its centre was the pretty white and gold bed, and in it, looking very frail, lay Henriette, her dark eyes turned expectantly to the door, her mass of dark curls carefully tied back to the cane-work above her pillows.

At the sight of Grizel her eyes lit up and she moved one hand.

"Oh—at last!" she half whispered, "I've wanted you all day!"

"You must not talk much—Lady Thurston will only stay a quarter of an hour," the nurse enjoined, and then as she had promised, left them, and Grizel took a chair close to the bedside and laid her hand lovingly over the fragile little one on the coverlet.

"I was out with Diane," she said gently. "I am so sorry, dear, but I am here now. You wanted to talk to me, Mr. Clievedon says."

"Yes," Henriette grasped her feverishly and moved a little nearer on her pillows. "Grizel . . . I'm going to die . . . no . . . do not interrupt. I have so little time and I must tell you . . . I am so frightened . . . I must."

She paused a moment and Grizel bent forward, smoothing a soft lock of short hair back from her forehead with a tenderness all her own.

"I am listening, dear . . . you must try not to be frightened," she said.

"But you do not know what it is!" Henriette exclaimed. "Grizel—do you remember you once said you would love me whatever I did? It was here—here in Paris. But you will not when I tell you. It would be—not possible." Again she checked Grizel by a sign and went on more rapidly as if her emotion gave her strength. "I have done—I have been—very wicked. I have"—her nostrils

dilated and her great eyes fixed on Grizel's were desperate—"been unfaithful to Lewis—I dare not tell him—not even now. Grizel, do you understand? It has been for years—three—four years. Lewis was often away. I could have gone to him, but I did not want to . . . and then Victor—Victor came and—and—we fell in love. And then—I grew frightened, but I did not love Lewis any more. I do not think I ever loved him, Grizel—don't you understand?"

She broke off trembling and Grizel, regardless of her gesture, leant forward and spoke.

"Dear—don't get so agitated, you are doing yourself harm. Yes. I understand. I have understood a long while. I knew."

"You *knew*?"

Weakness alone kept Henriette on her pillows as she stared incredulously into the eyes regarding her so tenderly. "Grizel! How? Did Victor——"

"Victor has never opened his lips about you," Grizel said, and despite herself there was a hint of indignation momentarily in her voice. It faded, however, and she went on very gently to tell in a few brief words how the whole sad business had come to her knowledge. At its end, Henriette uttered a little cry.

"And you never let me know! You never drew back from me or shrank from me! You were just the same. You kept your word . . . Grizel!"

She lifted weak arms and Grizel took her in her own, heedless of danger.

"Dear, it's not me you need trouble about," she said after a moment. "It's your husband—it's him you've wronged. Can't you tell him?"

She felt the slight form shudder convulsively and looking down at the face resting against her breast, spoke no more of confession to Lewis.

"There, dear, don't look so frightened," she said. "It is all right. You are sorry, are you not?"

Henriette nodded.

“Yes. And I—I meant to be good, but it was so hard. I liked being admired—and Victor understood. Lewis was so exacting, he expected me to have interest in important things—and I hate important things. And Diane—I liked having her with me to drive and look pretty—but Lewis”—she paused a moment struggling against weakness—“Lewis thought I ought to train her—and see she was taught things. And it has always wearied me to teach any one anything. I had a good nurse.”

Again she broke off and this time Grizel spoke.

“Dear . . . you are exhausting yourself . . . don’t try to say any more.”

But Henriette would have her way, and with a touch of her old petulance, put Grizel’s remonstrance aside.

“I must talk . . . it does not matter . . . and Victor, does he know?”

“Yes. He has been every day to enquire for you. Do you want me to give him any message?”

Henriette signed a negative and once again her fingers tightened nervously on Grizel’s.

“No. No. Nothing. I want to forget Victor. He said dreadful things to me when I saw him last! It was at Gabrielle’s dance. He was horrible to me just because I told him I hated having anything to do with sick people.

“Of course I couldn’t care any more when I knew he was ill, could I?”

She paused, half expecting an answer, but Grizel evaded the subject.

A dull ache of sorrow different from anything she had ever experienced, was at her heart, and she did not find it easy to speak. Contrary to M. Louis, Grizel felt oddly convinced that Henriette was right in her belief that Death was coming, and even facing Death she could not free herself from the utter selfishness that had wrecked her life. Totally unable to appreciate any point of view but

her own, she could only think of the consequences of her sin to herself, never to the man she had married or the lover she had thrown aside. Grizel saw it all, and suffered accordingly, for she had loved Henriette with an unswerving loyalty and tenderness and she loved her still.

As she remained silent, Henriette looked up.

“Do you—hate me now?” she said half under her breath. “Grizel—do you? Have you forgotten what you promised me? Are you going to condemn me?” There was a nervous excitement in her voice that went to Grizel’s heart. Bending, she kissed the damp forehead.

“No, dear,” she said very softly, and her voice was unsteady. “Who am I to condemn any one?”

“And you forgive me?”

Again the hopeless impossibility of the point of view; but for the shortness of the time that admitted of no self-indulgence, Grizel could have broken down and wept.

“It isn’t me you’ve injured,” she said when she could control her voice. “Darling, don’t you understand it’s not my forgiveness—or to me that confession is due. Not perhaps even your husband now.”

“You mean God?” Henriette’s brilliant eyes, bigger than ever in her white face, sought Grizel’s. “Yes, I suppose so. But God seems so far away. I’ve never thought much about Him.”

She paused a moment, then fear flickered over her face.

“If—I die,” she said hardly above a whisper, “I shall have to think, shall I not? He will be there, Grizel! He frightens me!”

“Henriette—my darling, don’t look like that!” Grizel cried. “You believe in my love for you, don’t you? Very well then, God’s is far, far greater—so infinitely greater that it’s almost absurd to speak of my care for you beside His. Believe that! You must believe it.”

“I suppose so. Your eyes are full of tears, Grizel. Are you sorry for me?”

“ Yes, Henriette, yes, dear. I love you.”

A movement at the door told of the nurse's return, and Grizel knew she must go. Bending, she kissed Henriette again, longing to say all that was in her heart yet unable to utter one word, and Henriette kissed her in return and followed her to the door with a strange look in her great dark eyes. She was glad that Lewis was not waiting for her, glad that only Diane, freshly groomed from Yvonne's hands and ready to dine with her father, was in the *salon*; as she entered Diane came quickly forward.

“ Daddy asked me to ask you to excuse him for a few minutes,” she said. “ He hopes you will come back to dine with us.”

“ I fear I cannot to-night, dear,” Grizel said, conscious only of her longing to get away alone. “ Will you thank your father and explain that I must go back? I will call to enquire to-morrow early. Good night, dear.”

She bent and Diane kissed her with the eager affection she loved, thanking her for the pleasure of the day, and accompanying her to the hotel entrance, asking if she wanted a cab with a thoughtful courtesy that was almost comically like her father. Then at last Grizel was alone, driving down the Avenue Marceau to the river, through the golden beauty of the summer's evening, alone with her thoughts.

That night Henriette died.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WHEN M. Louis brought the news to the rue Solférino about ten o'clock the next morning, Grizel knew that she had expected it; but it nevertheless came as a shock in which grief and pity mingled, and later on she walked to Saint Sulpice, and in a shadowy recess of the vast church knelt to pray for the wayward soul that had passed.

The formal prayers ended, she knelt on, gazing through the dimness to a distant glimpse of the high altar, wondering, thinking, hearing again Henriette's half-impatient words:

"You mean God? . . . I've never thought very much about Him. . . . He frightens me."

Poor little Henriette! So tempest tossed and wilful—was she frightened now, Grizel wondered, or had the God she dreaded and tried to ignore, stilled fear and ignorance together in His infinite pity?

No answer could come to that question, no assurance that all was well—the Veil had fallen between one more soul and the world of men, and the destinies of God had enfolded it beyond all human knowledge or love. Yet Grizel, kneeling there in the quiet remoteness, felt instinctively that no better thing could have happened. Henriette, with her weakness, her sin, her charm, and her vain efforts "to be good," had passed into the great life beyond, into the keeping of God.

Grizel rose at last quite unconscious how long she had been in the church and went out into the May sunshine, which streamed across the Place St. Sulpice in a flood of brilliance.

The pigeons, rejoicing in the return of summer, were strutting about the wide pavement, the trees waved their scented leaves in a southern breeze, and a very old man grinding knives sat close to the fountain singing in a very old cracked voice.

It was midday she found, glancing at her watch ; so a little surprised at the lateness of the hour, she hurried back by the rue de Tournon and the Boulevard, the contrast between the light and life of the sunny streets and the dim interior of the great church making itself powerfully felt.

She lunched alone with her grandfather, M. Louis being always out at this hour, and Victor not putting in an appearance, and afterwards wrote a brief note to Lewis and one to Diane, offering to take the latter should Lewis wish her not to remain in the hotel. She drove out with M. Lavel in the afternoon and left both notes at the "Superb," and as the little open cab passed down the Avenue Bois de Boulogne could not but think of her recent walk with Lewis.

She did not see Victor till the evening when he came in towards ten o'clock to find her alone, for M. Louis was out and M. Lavel had already retired.

Grizel seated in her favourite place at night, the little ante-room off the hall, had been trying to read, but her thoughts wandered, sometimes to the latter years, but more often further afield to the days at the Convent of St. Clotilde when Henriette had first become her friend. The thought of Lewis obtruded itself very little just now ; Henriette, as ever, held the chief place in the heart of her most loyal champion, and Grizel found that the chief feeling beyond the natural sorrow was one of intense thankfulness. Thankfulness that Henriette's secret need never now be known.

When she heard Victor she called him and he came in and dropped into a chair near by ; he looked pale and very grave and Grizel longed to speak yet hesitated.

Presently he solved her difficulty by an abrupt remark.

“Do you know if—if the funeral is to be here or in London?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t seen Mr. Clievedon. Have you been to the hotel?”

“Yes. I—saw her.”

His mouth quivered, but he took his underlip between his teeth savagely and after a moment spoke again:

“Lewis gave me a note in reply to yours. Here it is.”

He handed it across; a brief answer thanking her for sympathy and asking if she would take charge of Diane to London on the morrow as he had many arrangements to make. At its end she looked across at her brother.

“Henriette is to be buried in London,” she said, “on Friday.”

To-day was Tuesday.

Victor made no reply, and for a while silence reigned; then presently looking at him Grizel saw he had covered his face with his hands, and acting on a sudden impulse she crossed over to his side, and bending put her arm around him.

She felt him shiver at the unexpectedness of her touch, and presently he leant his head against her and she felt the hot sting of tears against her bare shoulder—yet she uttered no word, only knelt beside him till after a while he drew away, master of himself once more.

He went up to his room very soon afterwards, and by his kiss and the look he gave her she knew he understood her silence and was aware of her knowledge; then very weary she sought her bed.

She met Diane in Yvonne’s care at the Gare du Nord the next morning, and while the maid’s eyes were red, Diane, except for her pallor and her silence, looked as usual. Indeed, in the child’s heart sorrow was outweighed by relief, for to her Henriette had been a being to be feared

and admired, never loved, and now she would have her father all to herself.

That last thought outweighed every other consideration in Diane's estimation, and now watching the country in all its first beauty of summer a great load seemed lifted off her mind. She tried hard to feel what she designated to herself as "properly sorry," and certainly Henriette's death had been a shock to her; but whereas she could plan a future with immense eagerness she knew that if her father, instead of her mother, had died, no future would have seemed possible—only an agony of grief. And therein lay the difference.

They went to Sloane Street on their arrival in town, for Lewis had asked Grizel to stay with Diane for the night, and the next morning Marcel called, having come up to town with Lilian.

He took Diane out into the Park and the day dragged past, and in the evening Lewis's uncle and aunt, Lord and Lady Richmond, arrived and Grizel handed over her charge to them.

The next day was the funeral, and she saw Lewis from a little distance, and hurried away afterwards feeling oddly disinclined to meet him then.

Not for a whole month did she hear of him, then she was summoned back to Paris by M. Louis to stay at the rue Solfèrino and help entertain one of M. Lavel's old friends, who was coming to pay a short visit. The old friend was a very famous Russian conductor, and Grizel enjoyed every moment she spent in his company and listened through many delightful hours to the conversation between him and her grandfather.

On the evening he left she drove with him to the station; he was going to Milan—and then as the night was so perfect, decided to prolong her drive and told the man to follow the river to the Pont de l'Alma and then make for Passy and come back on the other bank.

She felt as she had felt nearly two years before on the day when she had first met Lewis Clievedon—that she needed quiet in which to arrange her thoughts.

She hoped that Lewis would leave Diane in her charge, should he decide to travel for a time, and though she tried to avoid thinking much of him, she found herself anxious about him and desirous that he should take every care of his health, which was certainly not of the best at present.

She did not attempt to disguise from herself the fact that she loved him; such self-deception would have been unworthy even if it had been possible, but she had suffered enough in her life to acquire patience, and foremost in her heart was an immense relief that when temptation threatened she had been loyal to Henriette.

The little cab turned the corner of the street, glided on its fat pneumatic tyres across the Pont Solfèrino, and drew up at the house.

As she stepped out of it the door opened and she was face to face with Lewis himself.

One glad irrepressible exclamation of welcome broke from her, then biting her lip with vexation at herself, she endeavoured to welcome him more conventionally.

“You are a great surprise!” she said as they shook hands. “When did you come?”

“Not half an hour ago. I crossed last night,” he said, his eyes scanning her with close attention. “I am on my way to Marseilles and I wanted first to see you.”

“To Marseilles?”

She stopped abruptly half-way up the stairs.

“You—are going abroad?”

“Yes. I am going to India for six months.”

“To work?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not fit!” she exclaimed, the words breaking from her impetuously. “You need rest.”

“It’s a light job—and I must have something to do

just now. It won't hurt me. It's special work and will only take me about six or eight months."

"And Diane?"

"It is about Diane that I wished to see you—partly. Will you come and dine with me quietly somewhere?"

"Won't you dine here instead? Uncle Louis is out and we shall be quite alone. It will be pleasanter for you than a restaurant."

"Thank you. I should prefer it," he said, and after a few minutes' casual conversation, Grizel went to give the necessary orders and to change her dress, while Lewis waited, smoking, in the little ante-room.

They talked impersonally through dinner, and when the meal was ended and they were seated in the cool little *salon* with its windows wide open to the hot summer night there came one of those long pauses that become insupportable by reason of all the manifold words longing to be uttered. Grizel, feeling the danger, spoke first.

"You wanted to talk about Diane?" she said. "What was it? What are your plans?"

"Yes," the monosyllable was not very helpful, and it seemed for a moment or two as though he were going to say no more; then:

"What are yours?" he said. "Are you going to remain at Altonbury or are you going to town or——"

"I am coming here," she said. "I have already almost decided on an apartment in the rue d'Assas. Grandpapa really needs me, and baby, and I can be very happy here. I shall take it for six or nine months. Will you not let Diane come too? It will be excellent for her French, and there is talk of Kiki joining me for the same reason."

She had put it bluntly, she knew, but she felt instinctively that he was finding it difficult to say what he wished, and her instinct was right as his look and tone of relief showed.

"That would be exactly what I should like for her,"

he said. "I don't want to send her to Lady Richmond, and she is devoted to you and to your small son. But it's taking advantage of your kindness. I've done that too much already."

"You could not," she said quietly. "And I should dearly love Diane's companionship. We are great friends, she and I, and I want her. Later——"

She had not meant to say more and broke off abruptly, and Lewis moving a little restlessly in his chair glanced at her, then out at the dusky blue of the heavens, that looked soft as velvet above the roof.

A few stars were glimmering through the dense blue, but the air was too hot to allow them to be brilliant, and eastwards the moon was rising, hanging like a great golden globe low in the heavens and giving promise of a glorious night. All was still just here in the quiet street, and the sound of traffic in the Boulevard came only as a murmur, and the lights in the river reflected themselves a myriad-fold on its quiet surface, but Lewis felt none of the calm of the night for strangely mingled emotions were astir within him.

The piteousness of his wife's death, she who had been so gay and thoughtless, flitting like a lovely butterfly through life, was hitting him anew, making him question himself for the thousandth time as to his conduct towards her; and in the same breath as it were, the love he had fought against so long for the woman beside him, clamoured for expression.

Over and over again during these last few hours he had felt the impossibility of leaving her without in some way showing what he felt, yet he knew he must not, could not, in decency speak of his love for her.

His abrupt movement startled Grizel for the moment, then seeing his face she took her courage in hand, knowing as only a woman who truly loves can know, the crisis of feeling at which he was.

“ We need not speak of the future,” she said so quietly that her tone almost deceived him. “ When you return from this special mission will be time enough for that. Until then let me have charge of Diane here in Paris, and I can write very fully of all that occurs. You honour me with your confidence over her. We are—friends, you and I, and surely that is all that is necessary. Can we not leave things for the present like that ? ”

Something in the tone of her last words made him look at her. For a long moment their glances held, and as he looked something of the struggle and the weariness died within him, and hope vanished for certainty to take its place.

With a little gesture that spoke volumes he showed his agreement with her request, hesitated, then spoke.

“ Marcel says he will bring Diane to you,” he said. “ And now I—I am going. I shall not see you again, but ” —he paused a moment, his eyes saying what his lips must not—“ but it is not really good-bye this time, is it ? You’ll write every week to me ? And about yourself as much as Diane ? ”

“ Yes,” she said quite simply. “ And you will do the same ? ”

“ Yes. It—is only six months, but it feels like an Eternity. No—don’t come down with me, let me go now—Grizel—God bless you ! ”

His voice was unsteady, and to hide his emotion he bent and kissed the hands he held prisoned in his, then turning went out of the room without looking back.

A moment later she heard the door close and gazing out of the window saw him in the soft moonlight walk swiftly away across the Pont Solfèrino.

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